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TEMPTED THROUGH LOVE; OR, ONE WOMAN'S ERROR.

BY LILLIAN LOVEJOY,

AUTHOR OF "SINNED AGAINST," "HONOR BOUND," "A STRANGE MARRIAGE," ETC., ETC.



MONA DID LOOK SOMETHING LIKE A VIRAGO THEN.

Tempted Through Love; OR ONE WOMAN'S ERROR.

BY LILLIAN LOVEJOY,
AUTHOR OF "BUYING A HEART," "HE LOVES
ME NOT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THROUGH TROUBLED WATERS.

"WANTED, a lady, about twenty-five, accomplished, refined, and of prepossessing appearance, as governess-companion to a young lady of neglected education. She would be required to superintend the studies of her pupil under efficient masters, and to exert a beneficial influence over her amusements and demeanor. Liberal remuneration and comfortable home. Apply, inclosing photo., to
"Mrs. T., LENNOX, MASS."

The newspaper was two days old (they generally were before reaching the school room), and Ada Dalkeith threw it aside with a sigh, exclaiming, "I don't suppose I should do any good by answering it now. What is the good of trying to escape from my present life? I shall always have to lead the same, or starve. Sometimes, if it could be done quickly, I think the latter would be the better alternative."

She was very beautiful, despite the discontented, wearied expression of her face just then, and the life so distasteful to her was that to which so many poor gentlewomen are condemned—that of a governess.

Left an orphan when only ten years old, her relations had procured her an entrance into a school, where she was to be trained for the life for which she was destined, altogether regardless of the question of her fitness for it.

Very hard had the poor indulged darling of a quiet, refined country home found her new life, with its strict discipline of school routine and work, and she had rebelled against it with all the strength of her young will.

But then, at least, she had companionship, and her bright, genial disposition made her a general favorite with her companions; so she often now looked back to that time with almost fond recollections when it was a thing of the past, and she was condemned to the solitude, combined with the monotony, of the school-room—the Hartford Home School.

At eighteen, her education being completed, the relations had once more bestirred themselves in her behalf, and procured her the position of governess to the Hon. Mrs. Alford's children. Then they impressed, with many prudent admonitions, on her mind that the situation was a most desirable one, and that she was a most fortunate girl to be so comfortably settled.

Perhaps Ada was ungrateful to kind Dame Fortune; for, certainly, she felt the reverse of grateful for the places in which the lines had fallen to her, especially as time went on and brought no change or variety into her career.

At first she had hoped that some wonderful stroke of Providence would manifest itself in her favor, and bring her the freedom for which she craved. It seemed so impossible that all her young life should slip by and bring not one single chance of the enjoyment she could have so well appreciated. But the days and weeks lengthened to months, the months to years, and still no change appeared, still the same unsympathetic, mechanical life, until she felt at times that her lot was unbearable.

"How very discontented and wrong-minded!" would say the comfortable and well-cared-for.

Well, what had she to make her contented? Will a sufficiency of good food, warm clothing, and housing satisfy the natural craving of a young girl for all that makes life worth living for? And Ada possessed an unusual share of the capability of appreciating all this.

She was very beautiful, and had had no one to feel proud of her beauty since the old days when she had been her father's constant companion. It was a necessity to her to have some one to love and caress her. She had all

the need of a naturally weak nature for a stronger to lean on and look to for guidance. But all this had to be repressed. Daily she must occupy herself with tasks utterly uncongenial, and hear constantly the sounds of the social gayety and mirth in which it was forbidden her to join. But worst of all, there was not one person in the world to whom she could turn for sympathy and companionship.

What wonder if she grew discontented and apt to fall into the way of entertaining a vast pity for herself? Lately the feeling of repulsion to her life had grown stronger than ever, and she had determined to make a change somehow.

A young girl she was no longer. Nearly eight years had passed since she left school. Eight years!—ah, how slowly and miserably they had dragged on, and yet now they seemed but a few months; or, rather, as a perfect blank in her existence, during which she had vegetated rather than lived.

She shuddered a little whenever she thought of the future, and almost wished that the natural clinging to life did not force her to continue toiling for the means to support it when it was so hopelessly wearisome and wretched.

"How I wish I could be a kitchen-maid, or menial servant of some sort!" she exclaimed, as a burst of laughter came up from the servants' hall below. "I should not like the work; but they can enjoy themselves when they have done; and I do so hate to be always alone!"

Then the advertisement was read through again; and she held the paper a long time in her hand, looking earnestly into the glowing fire, as if she would read a solution to her question there.

"Comfortable home!" she mused; "I dare say Mrs. Alford calls *this* comfortable!" And she glanced round the small, bare apartment.

The walls were decorated with maps; a book-case, containing very shabby, ill-used lesson-books, which leaned up against each other in the most disconsolate way, as though their energy had been completely washed away by the constant bedewment with salt water which they experienced; and a small, evidently discordant piano, occupied one end; while in the corner furthest from the fire was a hard horse-hair sofa. A blackboard, some stiff-backed chairs, and a plentiful supply of inkstands, completed the inventory.

Ada turned from her survey with a look of disgust.

"A young lady of neglected education!" she continued to soliloquize. "I dare say she is a rough, ill-mannered hoyden; but one would be better than five! 'Liberal remuneration!' That does sound inviting after two hundred dollars per annum for all that I do here. And then—oh, then, it would be a change, and I would give anything for that. Yes; I will answer it and take my chance."

Suiting the action to the word, she got her writing materials, and at once set about the task.

It took a good deal of consideration—"For I may as well make the best of myself," she reflected. "If I don't praise myself, there is no one else who will."

She read through the list of her recommendations with a critical air.

"There, that is all I can think of!" she said, closing the envelope. "And now I will go to bed and sleep on it."

But sleep she did not for some time; her mind was too busy with dreams which just this slight chance of a variation had suggested. For long after she had loosened her long golden hair from its heavy coils she remained motionless and lost in thought.

It was a pity that there was no fond mother to look upon that fair picture with a sense of growing pride; for, in spite of her five-and-twenty years and her dull life, Ada looked very girlish still, and exquisitely beautiful.

It seemed almost impossible to believe that she had never experienced the delightful feeling of youthful enjoyment and innocent pleasures, her whole appearance betokened so

thoroughly an intense capability of appreciating it.

The full, rosy lips, even though they might betray a lack of firmness, were faultless in outline, and her dark blue eyes looked ready to beam over with mirth and fun at the slightest provocation, while the delicate cut of her features, and the quick, varying expression, showed as clearly the presence of a sparkling spirit of repartee.

She looked intently at her own reflection. "I was not created for a dull, emotionless existence," she said. "It seems that nature does sometimes make mistakes, after all. Oh, how I long for a time of real life—not existence, but real, happy life! I would give years and years of mine just to enjoy a few months in a whirl of love, admiration and excitement!"

Several times during the next day Ada lost herself in a journey after the whereabouts of her letter, and was recalled by a confused jangle of discordant notes as apology for scales, or the atrocious pronunciation of French verbs, which aroused her to insist on more exactitude—an effort which generally resulted in an argument rather trying to her peace of mind.

In the evening she received an invitation to join the guests in the drawing-room—an invitation equivalent to a command, as it was coupled with the exhortation to bring down some music.

At first she felt inclined to refuse; but, after all, a few hours in the gayly-lighted, flower-scented drawing-room was better than the solitude of the dingy school-room.

"It's very kind of mamma to ask you down in the drawing-room, isn't it?" said Maud, at the tea-table. "I heard her tell Caroline that your music was such a great help that she should ask you down much oftener if only you were older."

"Then why do Grace and Caroline go down?" asked Ella, who was yet too young to know much of the conventionalities of society, and thereby drew down scorn on herself from Maud and Ethel, young ladies in their teens, who piqued themselves on their knowledge of the world, learnt from the gossip of their mother and elder sisters. "They are both younger than Miss Dalkeith, and they go down every evening."

"Stupid child!" said Ethel. "They are 'out,' and Miss Dalkeith does not 'come out,' because she is our governess."

"Well, I think it is very mean to ask Miss Dalkeith after dinner," remarked Tom. "It's no fun going when all the grub is over!"

"Oh, but she sees all the ladies' dresses, and talks to some of the gentlemen!" said Maude. "It's just like a boy, to think only of eating!"

"And just like a girl only to think of dresses and gentlemen!" retorted her brother, contemptuously. "If I were Miss Dalkeith, I wouldn't go at all if I wasn't thought good enough for the dinner."

Here perceiving that the argument was growing rather warm, Ada interposed, and intimated that it was not well-mannered to discuss people when they were present.

CHAPTER II.

A CHANCE ACQUAINTANCE.

It was more than half-past nine before the summons came informing Ada that Mrs. Alford would be very glad of her presence in the drawing-room.

She lingered a few moments before the glass, arranging the last touches to her simple toilet.

Nothing could be plainer. A black velvet, high in the neck, and with short, tightly-fitting sleeves, light lace ruffles, silver necklet and bracelets, and a spray of Marguerites in her hair; yet it became her to perfection, and she turned from the glass with an air of satisfaction.

"How absurd I am! There is no one to care if I look well or not; but I *am* glad that I am not ugly."

There was a confused hum of conversation as she entered the room; and for awhile she

remained unnoticed, and amused herself by listening to the gossip of the ladies.

"A most interesting story, and quite romantic," she heard one old lady remark to Mrs. Alford.

"So I believe," was the reply. "But I have never heard the full particulars."

"He went away when he was about one-and-twenty," continued the first speaker, evidently ready to give the unknown details, "on account of a dispute with his father about a young lady whom he wished to marry. The old man threatened to disinherit him, and the lady very wisely released him from his engagement. He was, however, very headstrong, and would not see things sensibly, and so went off to the other end of the world, vowing vengeance on his father and faithless lady love. There he seems to have consoled himself with one of the aborigines, and returned as the repentant prodigal, only not so destitute, having made unheard-of wealth, either farming or gold-digging, just in time to secure his father's forgiveness and the inheritance to the family estates."

"Did he bring his wife with him?" asked Mrs. Alford.

"Oh, no; fortunately not. She died, I believe, a few months after their marriage, leaving him with one daughter, who has accompanied her father to the United States. She has had no education whatever, I believe, and although nearly eighteen, is quite untrained and most unfeminine; wears her hair closely cropped, like a boy's, and rides all over the country unattended, followed by an enormous dog, which frightens people to death."

"How shocking!" murmured Mrs. Alford, casting her eyes on her own daughters, both well-conducted, irreproachable young ladies, utterly devoid of any disturbing eccentricities. "She must be a great trial to her poor father! I remember Hugh Dysart was always such a fastidious man."

"Oh, he has sadly altered!" remarked the other, shaking her head. "I fear, my dear—Of course this is in confidence."

"Of course—of course!"

"Well, I have heard that the wife was a very inferior person; naturally exercised a bad influence. Mr. Dysart is, I believe, actually quite contented with his daughter, and would not allow her to be taught at all if it were not for the entreaties of his sister, poor Mrs. Talbot, who is terribly distressed about it."

"Poor thing! I can well imagine how she must feel it!" sighed the younger lady. "I know what it is to have the responsibility of young girls on one's hands, even when they are well-bred and ladylike. It must be appalling to have such a creature to deal with!"

"In despair, she would have been willing to have received Miss Dysart into her own home, at Lennox, and allowed her to share the instruction and care of her excellent governess with her own daughters, but Mr. Dysart would not hear of such an arrangement—refused in a most brusque manner, I believe, and would only consent that his sister should secure a desirable companion for his daughter, who at the same time should be old enough to superintend her studies. But then he even stipulated that the lady should not be elderly, as he felt sure his wayward daughter would not submit to any one's authority, and could only be influenced by some one in whom she was interested."

"It is almost incredible!" exclaimed Mrs. Alford, looking horrified. "What will become of a girl so totally untrained?"

"Ah, what indeed! I pity poor Mrs. Talbot with all my heart! It is such a bad example, and she has such a number of daughters to bring out!"

Ada had felt no sense of dishonor in listening to the above conversation; for although imparted under the seal of confidence, she knew that it would soon be again repeated.

Recalling the particulars related, and the advertisement she had answered last night, it seemed that there was some connection be-

tween the two. "A young lady of neglected education" certainly answered to the description of Miss Dysart. The lady to apply to was Mrs. T—, of Lennox, and Ada knew that Mrs. Talbot lived there from the conversation she had overheard.

Her train of reflection was interrupted by the entrance of the gentlemen; and music being asked for, her services at the piano were soon in request.

The greater part of the guests were elderly married gentlemen; but Ada noticed one among them was young, and evidently an eligible match, judging from the endeavors of the eldest Miss Alford to attract him to her.

The gentleman was evidently not more than one or two-and-twenty, and seemed quite willing to accept the homage and attentions of the young lady so long as no great return was required.

His chief characteristic struck Ada as being a superb indolence. Lazy eyes, a lazy, amused smile, a soft, lazy voice, and a sort of air which seemed to plead, in a touching way, "Do as you like, my dear fellow, only don't let me be bored!"

He was a handsome man, too, with a graceful, well-knit figure, and good features, which might have been perhaps marred by the careless indifference of his mien to one who could read there the signs of really good abilities, only wanting a little energy to make their possessor a man of mark in the world.

Presently Ada perceived that he was standing at the narrow end of the grand piano, watching her as she played the accompaniment to Miss Alford's song.

"Will you introduce me?" he asked of the latter, as the song was finished.

"Certainly," replied the young lady, stiffly. "Miss Dalkeith—Mr. Churton."

So Ada bowed to her new acquaintance in orthodox drawing-room style, although her heart was fluttering at such an unusual event.

She was so seldom introduced to any but the lady visitors or married gentlemen, and was quite surprised at the novelty of this event.

Before Mr. Churton had had time to exchange many words with her, she was recalled to the piano—this time both as vocalist and instrumentalist.

"May I turn over for you?" he asked, keeping his position at her side.

"Thank you; I play without notes," she answered.

"That's how it should be," he remarked, "even though it deprives me of the pleasure. Don't you think it spoils the effect when one has all the external incidents, such as music-book, conductor's baton, etc., forced on his attention?"

"Perhaps you would like to go a little further, to complete the whole idealism," she said, laughing, "by dispensing also with the presence of the instrument and performer."

"In this case, certainly not," he answered, with a glance of unmistakable admiration, which had the effect of making Ada strike up at once the accompaniment of her song.

She was so little accustomed to admiration, that the color mounted to her cheek as though she were a young school-girl.

"What a lovely song!" he said, as she arose. "I love quiet music. I wonder why so many ladies prefer noisy things?"

"They are more effective, and it isn't very easy to gain the attention of a lot of people who all want to talk."

"Effective or not, I don't remember a single thing I have heard to-night except your song, and that will haunt me for a long time, 'for ever and for ever,'"—quoting the refrain of the song she had just sung. "If you are staying here, I shall beg you to do me the favor of singing it again."

"It is my home," she said, simply. "I am governess here."

He started with surprise, but quickly recovered himself.

"Ah, then, I shall have the pleasure of meeting you again, for I am staying here for a

week's shooting. And that reminds me that the juveniles were very eager to show me a collection of caterpillars or some reptiles, only I didn't feel inclined for the exertion. I think their intelligent interest in the wonders of nature ought to be encouraged, though; so, if you will permit, I shall come up to see them. Will you have me in your domain? I am a very good boy, and really have a great desire to see those caterpillars. May I come?"

"Certainly," she said, laughing; "but I warn you that you will be victimized if you put yourself into the clutches of my pupils."

"Oh, I don't mind,"—with an air of resignation. "I shall place myself under your protection, and if my feelings are very much ruffled, I shall propose music, and you will soothe them with 'For ever and for ever.'"

"I think we had better choose something more lively," she said, "or you will have a very doleful recollection of my performance."

"Not at all," he said. "I am delighted, if you will let me say, with your music just as it is, and I don't want to have any other recollection than that of to night. It is too good a one to change even for a better."

It was wonderful how many objects of interest that old school-room contained.

Ada was quite surprised at her own want of perception in never having discovered its attractions before.

Somehow the old dreariness seemed to have vanished, and the dingy room looked quite bright as Mr. Churton entered into the children's fun in a lazy, good-natured way, exchanging an amused smile with Ada now and then as Maud and Ethel, the airs and graces of their sisters tried to imitate, much elevated at the idea of having allured their visitor to their own domain.

"Don't you get very dull here sometimes?" he asked in a low voice, as the children retired to dress for the evening, and he found himself alone with her.

"Dreadfully!" she answered.

"It does seem a shame that you should have to be plagued with those little imps," he said, compassionately. "Thank goodness, they are gone now. Mayn't I have my song, Miss Dalkeith? You can't think how I have been looking forward to it."

"Oh, I can't sing now," she said, hurriedly. "It would be so odd."

"Why not? I am not going to let you off your promise so easily."

"But I didn't promise."

"At any rate, you did not refuse, and you won't be so cruel as to do so now. It's just the thing to sing at this time. We will do without the piano, if you like, and then no one can hear."

So she complied, and somehow the words sounded very sad and strange as she sung them in a soft, low voice, and he lay on the hearth-rug with the red glow of the fire lighting up his dark, handsome face.

"Thank you," he said, as she finished. "I like it better than ever. You will let me come again soon, won't you? It is so cosy and quiet up here; very different from the buzz downstairs."

Evidently he had forgotten that only a few minutes before he had remarked on the loneliness of the place, and Ada did not remind him.

And over and over again, when she walked with the children or was invited down to the drawing-room, it seemed that she exercised a magnetic influence which always drew him to her side, and she felt that there was something which had come into her life which had made it seem much brighter and gave her a sense of looking forward.

But the pleasure was of brief duration, for Mrs. Alford soon discovered that Mr. Ralph Churton was very favorably impressed by Ada's grace and beauty, and maneuvered that, during the few days he remained her guest, he should see very little of her interesting governess.

"It would be so unfortunate for him to form an undesirable connection," she said to

her eldest daughter. "Really, I am surprised at Miss Dalkeith. Hitherto her conduct has always been so prudent and unassuming."

Two days after the dispatch of the answer to the advertisement, Ada received a letter.

It was a most unusual event for her who had no friends with whom to correspond, and, with trembling hands, she broke the seal, nerving herself to meet with a refusal.

But the first glance showed that her application had been favorably received, and that Mrs. Talbot would be glad to have a personal interview with her in town during the ensuing week if she could manage to be there.

With fluttering heart, she got through the morning's lessons, and then sought her employer to obtain the necessary leave of absence, and give notice of her intention of leaving.

"Very good, Miss Dalkeith," was the very icy remark. "I will suit myself with some one else to take your place as soon as possible. But I scarcely expected that you would treat me with so little consideration, after being with us for nearly eight years."

Ada felt guiltily ungrateful, and yet could remember receiving no further return for the services of eight years than the quarterly receipt of a check for fifty dollars.

CHAPTER III.

A NEW LIFE.

RATHER more than two months have passed since Ada Dalkeith answered the advertisement in the *Herald*, and it is now the depth of winter, within a few days of Christmas.

On the platform at the pretty little station at Lennox, a young lady is waiting for the Boston train, unmindful of the fact that the snow is falling heavily, and covering her with a soft white veil.

Equipped in a closely fitting ulster and derby felt hat, guiltless of trimming, she laughs defiance at the weather from her bright brown eyes and rosy lips.

Presently, the piercing cold seems to make itself felt, and she enlivens herself with a brisk run up and down the length of the platform, closely attended by a huge St. Bernard dog, which shows unmistakable signs of approbation at his young mistress's performance.

"That's better, Hector," she said, giving him a pat as he nestled his head up to her side. "It's no easy matter for us to keep warm in New England, is it, old fellow? This isn't much like our Christmas in New Zealand. I sha'n't be sorry when the train comes in."

She leans forward to look for evidence of its approach, but in vain; and whistling an air with marvelous sweetness and clearness of tone, she takes several turns up and down.

The railroad employees look at her with some amazement, but they are beginning to grow accustomed to the odd manners of Miss Dysart now, and to know that, strange as she may seem, she is by no means a young person to be treated with scant courtesy.

She is tall and graceful as a young Diana, and looks capable of the energy and promptitude with which one generally associates the name of that heathen divinity.

"There it is at last!" she exclaims as the engine's shriek is heard and the lights loom through the deepening twilight of the short winter afternoon. "Now, Hector, mind you are friendly, and welcome Miss Dalkeith properly."

She holds up an admonishing hand, and the intelligent brute licks her fingers, looking up with eyes full of mute, yet faithful affection.

The train comes puffing and roaring into the little station, and the young lady looks curiously at each car.

A tall, slight form appears at one of the doors, and in a moment Miss Dysart is on the spot, eagerly welcoming the new arrival.

"You are Miss Dalkeith, are you not?" she exclaims impulsively. "But do come into the waiting-room until the carriage comes; you look so cold. I thought it would have been here before this. I walked on because we—Hector and I—don't like riding on a day like

this; but I mean to go back with you in the carriage."

During this stream of words she had helped Miss Dalkeith to descend from the car, and turned now to give instructions to the footman, who had just come up, about the disposal of the baggage.

"And now," coming into the little waiting-room, where Ada was standing over the fire, "if you are ready, I think we had better start, as we have nearly five miles to drive."

"Five miles!" exclaimed Ada, in astonishment. "You surely did not walk all that distance?"

"Of course I did," responded the young lady, coolly. "That's nothing. I am fond of walking, and sometimes Hector and I walk nearly twenty miles in the day. In summer I generally ride."

"It was very kind of you to come and meet me," said Ada. "I was quite astonished to see you on the platform."

"Did you know me at once, then?" asked Miss Dysart. "You hadn't seen me before?"

"Oh, but I had heard you described, and felt sure it was the same directly I saw you."

"Oh, I suppose it was Aunt Margaret who described me. I don't expect she gave me a very favorable report."

"But you are wrong," said Ada, smiling; "it was not Mrs. Talbot. I heard about you even before I had any intention of coming here; and I think this" (and she playfully touched the girl's short locks) "and your companion helped me to recognize you."

"Oh, where is Hector, by the by?" said Miss Dysart. "I want him to make friends with you. Come here, old boy," she continued, addressing her favorite; "come and see Miss Dalkeith, and make her welcome."

But Hector would not obey, and only growled fiercely when Ada approached him.

She started back in alarm.

"He does not seem to like strangers," she said. "Never mind; he will get used to me in time."

"Oh, but he always behaves well to people when I tell him," said his mistress. "Come here, sir!" authoritatively to the animal, who looked into her eyes with a questioning glance and crouched at her feet.

"Now, be friends," she continued. "Look, Hector," kissing Miss Dalkeith's cheek. "Now give her a paw."

Still, the brute looked unwilling, and it was only after the command had been reiterated that he obeyed.

"I never knew him so disobedient before," exclaimed Miss Dysart, looking vexed. "I do believe he is jealous, because he knows that I mean to love you."

"I am glad of that," said Ada, looking into her companion's bright face, and feeling that it would not be very difficult to reciprocate the sentiment. "I must be content with winning the mistress's love so easily, and manage to gain the dog's by dint of good behavior."

"I don't feel happy about him," said the girl, doubtfully. "Hector never changes his mind, and I did so want him to love you."

"Well, we won't grieve about him," said Ada, cheerfully, and feeling that she could very well contrive to be happy without having much intercourse with such a formidable-looking monster.

"What did aunt Margaret tell you about us?" asked Miss Dysart, after a pause. "I suppose she gave us—and especially me—a dreadful character?"

"Oh, I don't remember much that she said," said Ada, evasively. "I mean to find out all about you myself."

"Now, that is kind of you. I wanted to come and see you in Boston so much, but aunt Margaret got her own way in that. I had to be content with my victory in getting you at all. She wanted papa to get an awful, cold-looking creature, who would have irritated me to death, and I fell in love with you directly I saw your photo. Aunt Margaret said it was absurd, but I declared that if they did not let

me have you I would not learn a bit, and she knows I always keep my word."

"Perhaps I shall turn out an ogress, and torment you even more than the one you dreaded so much," suggested Ada.

"Oh, I am not afraid; I mean to try and make you like me, for you aren't a bit like the affected or else stand-offish young ladies that aunt tells me to copy. I should like to be like you. Will you make me call you Miss Dalkeith?" putting her hands into Ada's. "It does sound formal. My name is Mona; what is yours?"

"Ada."

"What a lovely name; and it sounds the right one for you! May I call you Ada?"

"Yes, Mona, if you like. I have not been called 'Ada' now for nearly eight years, and it is fifteen since I have had any one to love me."

Her voice trembled as she spoke, for she was touched by the girl's impulsive and affectionate manner, and felt that it would be very sweet to really possess her love.

"Poor Ada!" said Mona. "I shall love you now, and so will papa, and I do hope that Hector will too."

She was but a child, after all, in spite of her tall, womanly stature and slightly imperious manner.

It was dark before they reached Dene-Chase, Mr. Dysart's country seat and Ada's new home, and Mona took the new-comer at once to her room.

"There is only just time to dress for dinner," she said; "so I must go now, but I will send Ellis, my maid, to help you."

A bright fire was burning in the grate, and a profusion of wax candles shed a soft, radiant light over the comfortable, well-appointed room. Ada threw herself back on the luxurious couch, covered with a dainty, artistic cretonne, and gazed with unutterable satisfaction on her new surroundings.

"It begins well," she reflected. "I feel like a princess in a fairy tale, and am only afraid of waking up and finding myself back again at Enfield."

Mona was either not in the habit of devoting much time to her toilet, or had curtailed the process on this particular evening, for to Ada it seemed as if scarcely a quarter of an hour had elapsed before she heard a tap at the door, and a young, fresh voice call out, "May I come in?"

Permission being given, Mona entered, looking very well in her evening dress. She brought some flowers in her hand. "Will you have them?" she said, half-shyly. "I got them for your hair."

"How lovely!" exclaimed Ada. "You are a good little dear!"

Mona was nearly half a head taller than Ada; but the term seemed almost applicable just now, so much more childish did she look than when giving her orders at the station.

"Let me place them for you," she said, gratified at Ada's pleasure with her offering. "There, now you look lovely!"—standing back a few paces to gain the effect. "You are beautiful! Just look at us! Did you ever see such a contrast?"

Ada did look, for they were just standing opposite to a long mirror, and the contrast was worth noticing.

Each was very beautiful, but in such different styles. Perhaps at first one might not be inclined to admit Mona's pretensions to beauty; while Ada's loveliness overwhelmed with its fascination at once. She was so radiantly, gracefully lovely. Mona, on the other hand, was just a trifle masculine in appearance; there was something almost too firm and unbending in her demeanor, or, at any rate, seemed so beside the exquisitely graceful and truly feminine figure of her companion. But if the perfect contour of the elder woman's features and form, the shimmering gold of her hair, and her soft, melting eyes had delighted the eyes of an artist, the ingenious, noble expression of the younger, blended with the un-

mistakable firmness of character depicted on her face and in her bearing, would have impressed the student of human nature very forcibly,

Ada turned away from the survey with a laugh which had a slight ring of self-satisfaction in it.

"We had better go down now, dear, if you are ready," she said. "I heard a gong a few minutes ago, which I presume was for dinner."

"I must first introduce you to papa and Cousin Janet," said Mona, leading the way. "Cousin Janet is a very distant relation of papa's, who lives with us to take care of me and play propriety. Aunt Margaret didn't think it proper for me to live alone with papa"—scornfully—"but she is a dear old lady, and never interferes with any one."

Mr. Dysart was standing by the fire as they entered, but came forward to welcome Miss Dalkeith. He was a tall, handsome man of forty or thereabouts, and bore a striking resemblance to his daughter; only the strength of will which found a marked characteristic in her face was wanting in his, which was rather marred by a certain air of irresolution and nervousness.

Miss Janet Kendal seemed, as Mona had said, a dear old lady, and Ada saw at once would not be likely to interfere with her.

"So you have kindly undertaken to reduce my wild girl of the woods to order," said Mr. Dysart, offering Ada his arm to lead her in to dinner. "I am afraid you will find her an unmanageable little puss at times."

"Oh, I am not afraid!" said Ada. "So far, I have seen no sign of a want of civilization."

"Ah, they try to make me believe that she is something outrageously unorthodox!" he said, with an uneasy smile. "I—I hope you will give me a better account."

Several times during the evening Ada felt perplexed to reconcile the actual Mona with the one she had pictured to herself from Mrs. Talbot's account, which, truth to say, had well-nigh appalled her. The girl was so self-possessed, in spite of her occasionally childish manner, and even seemed so well informed, that it was almost impossible to believe that she had received no education and had been accustomed only to the society of a few New Zealand farmers.

A large portfolio of sketches stood in the drawing-room, which Ada soon learnt contained Mona's work only.

"I love to draw!" she exclaimed. "And at last papa gave me some lessons. He was a very good artist himself at one time, and can paint beautifully now when he will. I can only make little sketches; but it was my chief pleasure in New Zealand, where we had no piano. Here I play when I am too tired to go out, or the weather is too bad."

"Don't you ever read?" asked Ada, wishing to draw her out, and gain some ideas of her general capabilities.

"It is so difficult," she said. "Papa wouldn't let me learn out there, and I didn't mind, because we knew no one; but now I am ashamed, and have tried to learn; but it's very tiresome and dull."

Her education was clearly deficient, after all, then, and Ada's spirit sunk as she contemplated the abyss of ignorance which must reveal itself after a little time.

But yet, if her work as teacher might prove onerous, the comforts and luxuries of her new home would be ample compensation; and Ada exclaimed, as she sunk into her warm, soft pillows, "Oh, dear, it isn't difficult to feel good and charitable when one has everything so comfortable. I am in a heavenly state of mind, and could even feel amiable toward Mrs. Alford to-night."

CHAPTER IV.

SHADOW AND SHINE.

"Oh, I thought we should not be allowed to be happy much longer!" exclaimed Mona, com-

ing into the pleasant morning-room, where she and Ada generally devoted a few hours of the day to study.

"Well, what is the matter?" asked Ada. "It must be something very serious to make you pull such a sour face."

"It is something very serious," said Mona, drawing a low stool to Ada's feet and seating herself. "It is just this. Aunt Margaret and the girls are coming home next week."

"Is that all?" exclaimed Ada, in surprise. "Well, I think we shall be able to survive that calamity."

"All!" echoed Mona, a little offended. "You will find it not a little 'all' when we have her over two or three times a week peering into and finding fault with everything. She makes papa so fidgety, that at last he really begins to think that she is right, and that he has done everything wrong."

Ada pulled a long face.

"Well, it isn't a very cheerful prospect; but I dare say it won't be so bad, after all. Perhaps when Mrs. Talbot sees what an accomplished young lady you are growing, she will be so pleased that there will be nothing left to find fault with."

"Not she," said Mona, despondingly. "She will make comparisons between me and Marion, and talk about her excellent governess, Fraulein Buller, until I get in a passion and say something rude, and then she will either cry and say I am ungrateful, or look so contemptuous that I shall hate her. Oh, I know her! I do wish they weren't coming."

"Well, it is of no use to lament the inevitable," said Ada, cheerfully. "Come, we will leave the reading this morning and go for a ramble. It's a lovely day and we will walk off the blues."

"That's just what I want," cried Mona, looking delighted. "I don't feel a bit inclined to read this morning; only I felt a little afraid to propose another holiday."

"Am I such a dreadful ogress, then?" answered Ada, laughing.

"You are a dear, beautiful darling," answered Mona, kissing her affectionately. "Oh, Ada, I love you so much, and I know aunt Margaret will make mischief. You won't let her make you leave off loving me, will you?"

"It is impossible, my pet."

And as she spoke Ada felt that it was not possible. Did she not owe everything to this bright, impulsive girl? and surely she would never repay her with ingratitude.

The six months had passed very quietly and pleasantly since first she became domiciled at Dene-Chase.

Every one was very kind and seemed captivated by her beauty and graciousness—every one with the exception of Hector; he alone had always shown his disapprobation, and disdained to make or meet any friendly advances.

But this Ada did not mind, and was quite content to keep at a respectful distance from him, wondering how Mona could feel so perfectly happy with him only for a companion in the long rambles which she still at times took alone.

But those rambles were very rare now, for Mona preferred to spend the time in Ada's society, and already the influence of the latter's perfect breeding and repose was exhibiting its traces on the former's manner.

She had grown gentler, and the brusqueness of her tone was wearing off, giving place to a more dignified restraint, except when a childish fit of impatience caused a relapse.

"Our fate has arrived at last," sighed Mona, some ten days later, as she rode up to the front entrance in company with her father and Ada, and saw a victoria rolling leisurely along the drive.

A glance showed Ada the drift of her speech, and she sprung from her horse with a slower movement than usual, whispering to herself, "Now begins the fight! I wonder how it will end."

Mrs. Talbot was seated in the drawing-room talking to Miss Kendal, as they entered.

She was a stylish-looking woman, who had the expression of one who never allows herself to be taken at a disadvantage.

Mona always said that aunt Margaret was either incapable of feeling, or at any rate acknowledging herself wrong.

"Ah, there you are, Mona, at last!" she said, bowing coldly to Ada. "I quite expected to find you in, busy over your studies."

"We always ride or walk in the afternoon," said Mona, brusquely. "I hope you have not been waiting long."

"Not very, dear. But, Mona, my dear child, do you really always spend the afternoon in enjoyment? You must try to realize your position. You have so much lost time to make up for."

Mona began to look very angry, and said, curtly:

"We arrange our days here so as to suit the convenience of all parties concerned. Surely nothing more can be necessary?"

"It is a case, my love, in which the convenience of others must give way to your welfare."

Mrs. Talbot reflected, as she slowly and composedly uttered these words, that it was her duty to see after Mona's well-being, and disagreeable as it might be to even hint at Miss Dalkeith's remissness, she must not neglect it.

Mona looked over at Ada with a grimace, and inquired how her aunt had enjoyed her journey abroad.

"Quite delightful. We spent the greater part of the time in Rome. I so wished, dear child, you had been there to share the advantage. Our excellent governess, Fraulein Buller was such a treasure!" Mrs. Talbot always spoke in italics. "She has traveled so much, and knew how to direct the dear girls' attention to all that was most attractive."

"So Marion and Amy went to Italy for the sake of their education," said Mona, perversely. "When I go I mean to enjoy myself. I can't understand people going through places of that sort in the same methodical way as they would go through their English grammar."

"My dear Mona, how foolish you are! A woman should always have some knowledge of art. It adds greatly to her attractions."

"Well, wouldn't she get a much better knowledge if she were allowed to study a little thoroughly according to her own taste than if she had it dosed out to her as her governess sees fit? If I went to Rome I should like to devote myself heart and soul to the work, and find out what I really did admire, not what I was told to admire."

"My dear, as I said before, a knowledge of art makes a woman attractive; but if she devotes herself entirely to it she is apt to grow eccentric, and eccentric women are never popular."

"But what does that matter if she is happy in her devotion? To be admired is not to be happy."

"You are too young yet to follow my meaning, my dear. I am sure you agree with me, do you not?" turning to Ada.

Ada avoided a direct answer, more through fear of offending Mona than through absolute agreement with Mrs. Talbot.

Ada by no means aspired to a reputation for original opinions, and found it rather a relief to follow in the generally accepted ones of the world than to have the trouble of forming new for herself.

Mona soon took an opportunity of quitting the room to change her habit, perversely ignoring Ada's admonitory glances, and sending a comical one back in return, intended to convey the impression that she would be more likely to offend by staying than going.

Mrs. Talbot at once began to discuss her appearance and manner, making many minute inquiries as to her progress, etc., which Ada resented, and quietly allowed her to see that she intended to admit of no interference.

"Hugh, Mona still seems sadly brusque and awkward," said the lady, turning to her brother in despair. "Her manner distresses me beyond

measure. She is utterly different from most girls of her age."

"I have told you, Margaret," said Mr. Dysart, nervously fidgeting with his watch chain, "that I don't want Mona to be like other girls. I want her to be original, true and natural, and then what else you like."

Mrs. Talbot arched her eyebrows with a look of contemptuous pity.

"Well, original she most certainly is; and natural, too, if it is one's nature always to be perverse and insist upon saying the wrong thing. I hope, Miss Dalkeith, you will come over to Hillside. Intercourse with her cousins will do much for Mona; and although my brother naturally looks on her with prejudiced eyes, I am sure it would be to his satisfaction if she would tone down a little."

"We shall be very happy to come. Mona will be pleased to have her cousins' companionship."

Ada did not blush as she told this fib, and laughed inwardly at Mona's face when she heard of the invitation.

It was a relief when the call at length was ended. Mr. Dysart breathed a sigh as the last sound of the carriage wheels died away in the distance.

He had been striding restlessly up and down the room, and now stopped abruptly in front of Ada, who saw he had something to tell her. He had got into the way of making her his confidant, and as he was always forming fresh plans which afterward occasioned him much doubt and perplexity, it was not seldom that he came to her for advice.

"Forgive me for troubling you," he said now, in an embarrassed tone. "Will you give me your candid opinion of Mona?"

"Certainly,"—with some surprise. "But I thought you knew pretty well my feelings toward her."

"I hope I do," smiling with relief. "But, to tell you truly, Mona does show to disadvantage before Margaret, who seems to have an irritating influence on her; and it makes me feel that perhaps I have been wrong to let her grow up so differently from other girls."

"But you could scarcely help it; and, after all, her originality is her great charm,"—knowing this always was welcome to him. "And she learns so rapidly now that it is of no consequence that her education differs from a usual one."

"That is just what I hoped," he said, with satisfaction. "I wanted to keep her ignorant of women of the world—excuse me if I seem to disparage your sex. I know now there are exceptions. When Mona was born it was my great grief that I had a daughter; but the little thing grew and twined herself so closely round my heart, that I could not bear the thought of her becoming like all the women I had known, and determined that she should grow up without ever coming in contact with them at all. This was possible while we were abroad; but after we were home I began to see that I had made a mistake, and that Mona's training scarcely fitted her for the position she must take in life. I was perplexed and almost in despair until you came; but now I think she may become all that a woman should be, without being spoilt by a woman's follies and weakness."

"Thank you for this confidence," she said, gratefully. "I will do my best; and the work is not difficult, for Mona's is a splendid disposition."

"Make her like yourself," he said, "and I shall ask no more. Some day, if you will let me, I will tell you what it was that led me to give my only daughter such a training."

CHAPTER V.

AN UNLUCKY CONTRETEMPS.

ADA had a bad headache; and Mona, having placed her comfortably on the sofa and darkened the room, roamed away to pass the morning according to her own sweet will. After a visit to the stable, where her mare, Lady, always looked out for her tribute of apples and

other dainties, Mona directed her steps, followed by the faithful Hector, to a favorite haunt, where she loved to linger and dream away the pleasant hours of sunshine.

It was a glorious June morning, and the bend of the river where the rushes and wild flowers grew in such abundance was a delicious spot for such amusement.

Among the trees was one—a silver willow—which leaned almost across the river, at whose roots a natural seat was formed, which Mona loved well, and liked to occupy and lazily watch the kingfisher dart quickly through the air in pursuit of his prey, or the swallows skimming over the surface of the rippling water.

She had been seated nearly half an hour here, when the sound of voices and the dip of oars roused her from the reverie into which she had fallen.

Hoping that the intruders would soon retire, she remained quiet, and tried to recompose herself in her former attitude of entire repose. But some of the voices were familiar, and as a few minutes later she heard the "whish" of oars against the bushes which fringed the bank, a voice she recognized as Marion Talbot's remarked:

"This is the identical place where the young savage we were talking about resides. Have you no curiosity to make the acquaintance of the young lady of energetic renown, Mr. Ralph?"

"No, thank you," responded a lazy but musical voice, which sounded as though its owner were stowed away snugly in the bows of the boat, enjoying the luxury of a smoke; "no, thank you; energetic young ladies are not in my line. I like repose for myself and other people. If you must make your visit, Charlie and I will wait here, and take care of the boat for you."

"Fie, you ungallant cavaliers!" cried a second girl's voice, which Mona recognized as belonging to Amy, the favorite of her cousins. "Say, rather, you are too lazy to escort us!"

"I will come if Churton will," put in another man's voice. "Come, old fellow; it's too bad to let the girls go alone."

"Oh, you had better stay, Charlie," said Marion, quickly. "We shall get on very well, and you would be dreadfully bored. Mona is positively disagreeable at times, and always odd."

"I think she is very nice," said Amy. "She is awfully pretty."

"Pretty! Why, she is cropped as close as a Roundhead, and has absolutely no complexion!"

"But think of her figure and eyes!" said the other, stoutly. "They are exquisite."

"Well, if you admire amazons, I won't contradict you; but don't let mamma hear you say so. She thinks Mona's style lamentable, and that dreadful governess is ruining her."

"Miss Talbot, we shall all have to take up the cudgels in the distressed damsel's behalf, if you belabor her so unmercifully," said the lazy voice again.

"Then I think I shall join Marion, if only to see you bestir yourself," said Amy. "You look so exasperatingly cool and lazy there."

"Resting after my labors," he answered. "I appeal to the company generally if I haven't rowed like a Yankee."

"Well, take your rest now, for you will have to pull away pretty hard when we return. We sha'n't be more than three-quarters of an hour."

Then Mona heard the two girls leave the boat, and start off for the house. She was malicious enough to enjoy the thought of their useless mission, and would not make her presence known after the talk she had heard; not that the news was fresh to her. She knew that neither aunt Margaret nor cousin Marion liked her, but still the most amiable people are not pleased to hear themselves abused; and Mona, we know, was not always amiable. There was silence for some time in the boat after the girls had gone.

Then the lazy voice began again,—*"This is*

luxury. My only grief is that we have to begin our toils again so soon."

"Make yourself happy while you can, man. For my part, I am not sure that the bliss is perfect, and have half a mind to make an expedition on my own account, and seek out the pretty cousin and her lovelier keeper."

"Whew! that's where the wind lies, is it?"

"It's all very well to run them down; but they're both very pretty girls. I saw them riding the other day, and was bewildered to make up my mind between them."

"A case of 'how happy,' etc.!" said the other, with a laugh. "I begin to see Miss Talbot's wisdom in not allowing your escort. Gallantry to the visited rather than the visitors, eh?"

"Why not? I hate to hear girls run down one another. You may be sure they're jealous when they do."

"D'ye think so? I believe you're right. But if you're bent on exerting yourself instead of enjoying this rest, I must beg of you to let me off. Loud women are never in my line; and, by Jingo! the most bewitching siren of all couldn't tempt me from the boat to-day."

The other laughed.

"The girls are right, Churton. I never knew such a lazy fellow in my life as you are. But if you go in for repose, the governess would just suit you. Amy says she is awfully taking, and puts people on good terms with themselves."

"Not a usual quality among governesses. Poor devils! I always pity them, but don't care for a nearer acquaintance. I don't envy this one with your fair virago of a cousin."

Mona's cheek burned, and she longed to get away, but could scarcely do so without being perceived.

"How horrible those men are! I hate them!" she thought to herself.

Unluckily for her plan of remaining undiscovered, a sparrow of unusual temerity perched upon Hector's nose; and, awakening, he made a bound after the disturber of his repose, discovering as he did so the occupants of the boat.

"What a splendid fellow!" exclaimed Ralph Churton, with absolute energy, as Hector turned away in obedience to the low call of his mistress. "I must have another look at him."

He sprung from the boat as he spoke, followed by Talbot, and entered the nook which Hector had betrayed. With a "Whew!" of surprise he stopped short.

Mona did look something of a virago then; but Diana surprised while bathing could not have looked lovelier in her indignation. Her eyes were full of angry fire, her cheeks flushed, and her hands clasped tightly behind as she stood up to confront the new-comers.

"It's she, by Jingo!" said Charlie, pushing by, and going up to her. "Please excuse this intrusion, and let us introduce ourselves. You are Mona, I know, and I am your cousin, Charles Talbot. We were waiting in the boat while the girls went to call on you. They will be so disappointed not to find you in."

"Will they?" (coolly.) "We can walk up to meet them if you like; but I don't think they are likely to mind much."

Charlie gave a glance toward Ralph, indicating that his state of mind was the reverse of comfortable.

Mona was not very entertaining to her guests (Charlie had introduced his friend) during their walk to the house, for she felt too ruffled at the conversation she had overheard, and that her retreat had been discovered, to exert herself to be gracious.

On the lawn they met the two Misses Talbot, accompanied by Ada, who stopped short with heightened color as she perceived Mona's companions.

"We were coming in search of you," she said. "Your cousins have come to invite us to a picnic next week. Where did you meet the rest of the party?"

"Hector found them out, or they Hector. I

was behind the willow tree down by the river."

"Then you must have overheard us land?" said Amy, at once.

"Yes," said Mona, truthfully, but with a touch of shame-facedness as Ada's admonitory look informed her of the enormity of her proceeding. "But I am forgetting to introduce you, Ada. My cousin, Mr. Talbot and Mr. Ralph Churton" (turning to the gentlemen with a haughty composure amusingly incompatible with the childish fit of temper which had hitherto clouded her countenance).

"I have met Mr. Churton before," said Ada. "But I dare say he has forgotten me."

"Indeed I have not," said that gentleman, promptly. "I recognized you at once, and am delighted at finding that we are such near neighbors. I had almost given you up in despair when I found you had deserted Enfield. But I hope you will let me renew our acquaintance?"

"It is always pleasant to meet old friends," said Ada.

"And for me especially, since I was quite ignorant of having any in this part of the world. Do you still sing 'For ever and for ever?'" he asked, taking his place by her side. "It has haunted me ever since I saw you last."

"Oh, yes, sometimes. But I shall begin to think you sentimental."

"Think what you like, but I shall always believe it the loveliest song I ever heard. You see, it has very pleasant associations."

His voice was very low and musical, and her heart throbbed violently.

The cloud seemed to have partially lifted now, and the party, somehow merrier as they returned to the river, making plans for the coming picnic.

Ralph Churton kept by Ada's side, and directed much of his conversation to her; but now and then his look strayed to the tall, willowy figure of the girl in front, whose companion was evidently exerting himself to remove disagreeable impressions.

"She is a fine girl," he reflected, "but not my style. By Jingo! I sha'n't forget her eyes when we broke into her retreat in a hurry. They would be very fine if one could make them a little softer. No, fair women are my style; and, by George! Ada Dalkeith is the fairest of the fair."

CHAPTER VI.

HOW WILL IT END?

THE day for the picnic was a glorious one; not a cloud in the bright blue sky, and the sun shone with a genial brilliancy that promised to do much toward the day's enjoyment. It had been arranged that some of the party should go by water, and Charlie Talbot and Ralph Churton had promised to row Amy and Mona, or rather Amy and Mona had resolved to row them, both young ladies being experts.

Ada had laughingly declined her share of the exertion, protesting that she preferred a comfortable seat and perfect laziness for this weather.

"Quite right, too," Ralph had said. "I admire your taste. We will manage the steering and Charlie shall luxuriate in the bows. Of course you row stroke, Miss Dysart."

Thus everything was arranged for the comfort of one person at least, for he had the satisfaction of a place beside Ada, who was looking her very best, and of studying the magnificent brown eyes which needed but a touch of softness to make them charming.

"There is my abode of bliss," he said, lazily, pointing with his cigar to the fine old gabled house peeping out from the lordly elms and oaks which bordered the river banks. "It used to be a jolly place once, but it's awfully dull now."

"It must be when you are quite alone," said Ada, turning round to get a better look.

"Still, it is a lovely place. You must be very fond of it?"

"I hate it," he said, "and am never there

more than I can help. It's a pity, too, for the poor old place to be so neglected. If it weren't so big I shouldn't care; but I can assure you it is very lonely for a poor bachelor. Don't you pity me?"—to Mona.

"Why should I? There are lots of people who would be glad enough to keep you company if you don't like being alone."

"So there are; but then I've no one to entertain them, and entertaining most people is a bother. I hope you will take pity on me sometimes, Miss Dalkeith."

"I should fear to bother you."

"That's cruel of you. But my home is well worth seeing, they say. I can answer for the picture gallery myself, if you like that sort of thing."

"That is a temptation; so I am afraid we shall bother you. Mona is quite an artist, and will enjoy your pictures immensely."

"Splendid! Then it is a promise. You will give me the honor of introducing some of my favorites, Miss Dysart?"

"Thank you."

Her eyes were fixed steadily on her oar, and he had to give up the attempt to win a look from them.

They found the other guests awaiting them at the landing-place.

Mrs. Talbot eyed the group through her eyeglasses, and exclaimed, as they sprung on shore, "You sure have not rowed all the time, Mona? and you, too, Amy? How very imprudent! You will be over-tired all day, and you know that I don't like exertion for young girls. I should never have allowed it."

She looked at Ada as she spoke, but that young lady did not need the look to know that the rebuke was intended for her.

She did not care. Mrs. Talbot could not injure her, let her try as she might.

"Hugh, how can you be so blind to that odious woman's duplicity?" asked Mrs. Talbot of her brother, later in the day, as they were watching a group of young people, including Ada, Mona, Amy, Charlie and Ralph, setting off to explore the vicinity.

"What do you mean, Margaret? If you allude to Miss Dalkeith, allow me to say that I cannot permit her to be spoken of with disrespect in my hearing."

"Of course you are infatuated, and cannot see how she is throwing herself at Ralph Churton. Amy tells me it was simply disgraceful in the boat; she engrossed his whole attention."

"Yes; I suppose he admires her," said Mr. Dysart, absently; "and of course it is natural that his attention should be acceptable to her. Quite natural—quite."

"Natural! I should think so indeed! He is the best match in the county, and she is a governess, without a penny, old enough to be his mother. I say it is disgraceful!"

"Once more, Margaret, I shall be excessively annoyed at anything said further in disparagement of Miss Dalkeith. She possesses my full confidence and—esteem."

He turned away with a ruffled air, and walked absently in the direction the others had taken.

Mrs. Talbot looked after him contemptuously.

"Oh, the wind blows that way! A presuming creature! Well, of the two evils perhaps this is the least."

Meanwhile the party was strolling under the picturesque old trees, gathering wild flowers, and making the woods ring with their merry voices.

Mona was strangely silent. She had lingered behind, and was now sitting at the foot of an old oak, her hands clasped over her head, and thinking almost sadly of her old free life in New Zealand.

"Excuse me, Miss Dysart; the others have gone on, and I thought you would not like to be left alone. I hope I have not disturbed you?"

She looked quickly into Ralph Churton's eyes, and he caught a glimpse of the dewy tears which veiled the brightness of her own.

"I am just coming," she said. "Thank you for waiting for me." She gave another look round before going. "It is very lovely here; but it brings back remorse which makes me sad."

In a few minutes they were hastening after their companions, and she was laughing as gayly as the rest; but Ralph was contented, for he was satisfied that the bright eyes did look soft sometimes.

"He would be a happy man who could make those eyes look soft and tender for him!" he reflected, later on. "She is a strange girl, but she evidently doesn't like me. I suppose she hasn't forgotten those unlucky words in the boat the other day."

Churton Court was a fine old mansion of the Queen Anne style, and Mona was delighted with the picturesque scene as she and Ada drove up the avenue one day, in accordance with their promise to Ralph Churton.

"It's a lovely place!" she said, with rapt gaze. "What a disgraceful shame that he does not love and honor it as it deserves!"

"He loves it well enough," said Ada, smiling. "Foolish child! don't you see how proud he is really of it?"

"Then he oughtn't to mind showing it," said Mona, promptly. "It's a sham, and I hate shams!"

"Well, you must not hate our host. Don't be hard on him, pet. Every one cannot be as honest and energetic as you are. Besides, he isn't a sham, but really believes that he thinks everything a bore."

"What right has any man to look upon life so, especially a man born to position like his? Oh, Ada! he irritates me so, and yet he makes me sorry. I feel he could do so much better if he would try."

"I think him very pleasant," said Ada, unconsciously lingering over the words. "His very listlessness of manner is charming!"

"How can you think so? It ruins him entirely."

For once, Mr. Churton seemed to bestir himself, and even Mona could not complain of him, and owned that he was a good host.

He was ready to receive them in the hall when they arrived, and was already talking to Mr. Dysart, who had ridden and gone on in advance of the ladies.

"Shall we begin with the house or pictures first?" he asked, after refreshments had been served in a splendid old wainscoted apartment, which greatly aroused Mona's admiration.

"As you like," said Ada. "We commit ourselves to your guidance, sure of being interested whichever it may be."

"Well, we'll do the house, then, and make our way to the picture-gallery," he said, leading the way. "But don't expect too much, or you may be disappointed."

Slowly they made their way through each room, until at length the gallery was reached, the host proving a good conductor and his auditors very attentive.

Mona especially did not seem to lose one jot of all that was to be seen or heard, and though she did not talk much, he could see that she was deeply interested.

But the pictures seemed to hold her fairly captive. She stood in a mute, rapt attention before the grand works of many of the old masters, her countenance beaming with a deep, inexpressible joy.

"Papa, are they not glorious?" she exclaimed. "I feel that I scarcely want to go to Italy now, lest I should find some to surpass these in my love. But no, that would be impossible! Nothing will ever make me forget the impression of my first acquaintance with art."

"I am honored that I should have been the first to afford you this treat," said an unmistakably contented voice, which was no longer lazy, even to her critical ear.

"Please don't think me foolish to be so delighted," she said, humbly. "You know, I have scarcely seen any pictures besides my own and papa's, and a few family portraits."

They were surprised to find the afternoon drawing to a close before half the objects of interest had been inspected.

"You must promise to come again," said Ralph, as she prepared to go. "I have enjoyed your visit so much, and cannot tell you how greatly I thank you for coming. You have made me feel quite fond of the old place."

"Then Mona will be happy," said Ada, laughing. "If you could but know, Mr. Churton, how she troubles over your want of appreciation for it!"

"I should be glad if you liked it," said Mona, simply; "for it is very lovely and lovable."

"Ah! to-day it is brightened by your presence; but just think of all those immense old rooms and corridors when I am alone! They are not inviting then."

"I should always like them," said Mona. "Good-by, and thank you. I have enjoyed myself so much!"

That was a look from the deep brown eyes, such a look that it almost drove away the recollection of a pair of radiant blue orbs, which shone with bewitching softness as their owner sunk back into the carriage beside her young, dark companion.

"She is an odd girl," he reflected. "I like to make her interested, she enjoys it so thoroughly, and it is refreshing after the usual run of young ladies. I mean to draw her out; she is worth it."

During that summer, he and Charlie Talbot were constant visitors at Dene-Chase.

It formed such a nice resting-place to stop at when roving, and both found constant pretexts of either coming with books, music, or messages from mother and sisters.

It was surprising how much more agreeable aunt Talbot had become of late.

She scarcely found any fault; or if she did, it was in a gentle, bantering way.

Mona was too simple-minded to see the reason of this change; but Ada read that Mrs. Talbot would be willing to overlook her niece's oddities on consideration of the handsome fortune which would be such an addition to the family wealth should its owner be persuaded to bestow it and herself on her aunt's eldest son.

But Ada laughed at these plots.

"My poor little Mona! she is quite a child yet in these things and perfectly heart-whole, thank goodness! Still, I shouldn't mind seeing her engaged to Charlie Talbot if it weren't for his mother. He is a fine young fellow, and head over ears in love with her."

And so it happened that frequently during these visits Ada would allow Charlie to monopolize all Mona's attentions, and Mona herself was beginning to look upon her cousin as a very pleasant companion.

But oftener the little group would not disperse, and Mona, though retaining her place by Charlie's side, would address most of her conversation to Ralph Churton.

Ada never quite understood them, for, although they were much together, Mona always found so much fault with him, and indeed their whole conversation generally consisted in a lively raillery, half in fun, half in earnest.

Ada was pretty well satisfied that Ralph looked upon Mona as a spoilt, beautiful child, who liked to feel the importance of lecturing him on his short-comings.

"I needn't be jealous," she would think, "for I believe he likes me as well, even though I am getting an old maid."

And she would look at her lovely face in the glass, which certainly seemed to have grown more beautiful than ever lately.

And yet the change that had come over Mona herself was perceptible to all.

She was wonderfully softened, and had given up many of the old eccentric habits, more from the dictates of innate refinement than from precepts derived from either Ada or Mrs. Talbot; and it would be difficult to recognize in the rather dignified and, to strangers, reserved girl the hoyden who had whistled on the platform while awaiting her expected governess a few months ago.

Still original and energetic as she might be in some matters, she had learned to respect the susceptibility of others, and no longer took a perverse pleasure in running counter to the wishes even of aunt Margaret.

The summer was very hot and oppressive, and as the long months of drought passed on, very great distress became apparent in the village.

One day Mona returned from a long walk, looking troubled and weary.

"Oh, Ada!" she cried, "this is awful! They have the typhoid fever in the village. The Browns and two other very poor families are down with it, and the doctor fears it is spreading. I have been there, and the dirt and misery made me nearly sick and so wretched! It must be awful to be poor!"

Ada stared aghast.

"Mona, you have been in the fever-stricken cottages?"

"Of course! Why not? They must have help or they will die."

"But you—you— Oh, Mona, what will your father think?"

"That we ought to do our best to help in this trouble. Don't fear for me, Ada. I feel that I have no right to be living here in this luxury, while those poor wretches are wanting the very necessities and decencies of life. Oh, I hate it all!"

"Come here, Mona, and lie down. I shall send for the doctor at once. You are tired and over-wrought, and I tremble for the result. Never go again without letting me know."

"Indeed, I cannot obey you," said Mona, with an expression Ada knew well. "I have promised to take them help this afternoon, and must keep my word. I don't think I shall take the fever, for I am very strong and healthy; but if I do, it is all the same, for help them I must. Oh, Ada, my heart bleeds for their misery!"

"Mona, you are mad! Send the poor creatures all you will; but it is wicked to risk your own life so."

"I think it would be still more cowardly to think of it now. Good-by, Ada! I don't endanger you, at any rate."

"Mona, is that just?"

"Forgive me, darling! but I am so unhappy, and just a little disappointed. I thought you would be so sorry for them."

"So I am, dear; but I am still more fearful for you."

"It isn't necessary; I shall take care of myself. Good-by!"

But, in spite of the protestation, Ada was nervous, and felt vexed with Mona.

"Willful child!" she murmured; "I must go and speak to Mr. Dysart about it. Not that he can stop her now. I feel quite frightened. Good heavens! if she should bring the fever here!"

All through the long, weary months of sickness Mona was indefatigable. The outburst was a bad one, for the village was thickly populated, and the disease spread rapidly through the poor quarters. But she was right in her estimate of her own strength; and a new friend, with whom this time of adversity had made her acquainted, the Reverend Nicholas Cranleigh, took care that she did not overtask herself. It was almost winter before the disease was really conquered, and all danger considered to be passed.

Mona was enjoying the rare luxury of a day's quiet with Ada; but somehow during these long summer months a slight cloud had come between the two friends, and a day with Ada did not now seem to be quite the pleasure it had once been.

They were almost glad of the interruption when the servant announced, "Mr. Ralph Churton."

He had been away some weeks, and a rumor had reached them that he had been called to attend a funeral of some near relation; so that neither was surprised when he entered looking

pale and harassed, with a serious expression very unusual with him.

"We were so sorry to hear of your loss," said Ada, as he took her hand. "I am afraid you have had a very hard time."

"Yes; it has been that,"—trying to throw off his preoccupied air. "I am glad that it is over, and yet glad that it has come at last."

"Then your cousin was a sufferer, I suppose?"

"You do not know? Ah, I forgot you are comparative strangers here, and therefore can have heard nothing about it. She had been insane for years."

"How awful!" both his hearers exclaimed.

"It was dreadful!" passing his hand wearily over his brow, as if endeavoring to clear away disagreeable impressions. "You may wonder that I speak so openly about it; but the matter was so public that I had forgotten you knew nothing of it; but, if you will let me, I will tell you all the circumstances. I think it would be a sort of relief. May I?"

"I shall be deeply interested," said Mona, with that sympathetic look which was one of her chief charms, and which always drew him to her side when he felt inclined to be serious, which, as we have seen, was very seldom.

"Thank you; it is very good of you to say so, and I should like you to know the real circumstances, for any misunderstanding in such a matter would be unfortunate. Ethel was no real relation of mine. When my uncle married he knew that there was insanity in his wife's family, but would persist in having his own way. Poor fellow! he was punished for it. His wife died four years after their wedding, a raving lunatic; his son became the same when he was about fifteen, and remained in that state until his death; and the poor man died broken hearted when his only daughter also succumbed to the family disease. Thank Heaven! poor Ethel was the last of them, and the taint is removed at last."

He spoke very gravely, and both his hearers saw that he was deeply moved.

"It's an awful thing to get into a family!" said Ada. "The very knowledge of the danger must be enough to bring the disease itself upon one."

"It has been a frightful warning to us," he returned, solemnly. "I don't think there is one of us who would run such an awful risk again. I, for one, would never marry into a family where there was the slightest suspicion of such a thing. It is a case where a man must conquer his inclination, however strong it may be."

"I think you are right; but it must be an awful case for a man to choose in."

"Ay, indeed! But I am afraid I have given you the blues. It is too bad of me to bring my troubles here. And yet I think it has done me good. I felt so completely knocked over."

He seemed really relieved by the confidence, and grew more like himself before the end of the interview, even brightening up enough to banter Mona on her robust appearance in spite of the arduous work she had gone through of late.

"I have heard of your feats in the nursing line from a devoted admirer," he said. "The parson is enthusiastic about you, at any rate."

"Mr. Cranleigh does not reserve his enthusiasm for one subject. He acts and speaks with enthusiasm whenever necessary, and at all times; not as caprice takes him."

"Is that last innuendo meant for me?" he asked, with a grimace of mock humility.

"As you will," she answered, curtly, not quite unaware that her vexation was caused by his light manner so soon after he had seemed really touched and moved.

Christmas was just near, and the great hall at Dene-Chase was being decorated for a large ball. Mona and Ada had changed cavaliers; for Charlie Talbot was duteously assisting the latter to fix up a troublesome wreath, while Mona and Ralph Churton, nominally as far as the latter was concerned, decorating a large

pair of stag-horns, were sparring at one another. She was seated on the top of a pair of steps, trying to arrange the evergreens to her satisfaction, and he was supposed to be aiding her in some way. His laziness over the matter immediately in hand was the ostensible cause of the lecture she was giving him on carelessness and indifference in general.

He listened with imperturbable good-humor to her words, often turning her argument, in a lazy, amused fashion, on herself.

"Playing at 'Benedict and Beatrice,'" said Ada, with a smile, following the direction of her companion's wistful gaze.

"Not in earnest, I hope. You don't think that, Miss Dalkeith?"

"I hope not!" touched by his outspoken frankness.

"Do you think she ever guesses?"—he had taken Ada into his confidence some time before.

"Tell me, please, what you think?"—carefully pulling the berries from a beautiful sprig of holly.

"I scarcely know what to think," she said rescuing the holly. "She is such a perfect child in such matters. So far, I think she is heart-whole; 'but remember, 'Nothing venture, nothing win.'"

"I shall venture as soon as I see the slightest chance of success," he said.

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER A CLOUD.

MONA'S face is very stern as she walks from the village swiftly in the direction of home. There is a set look about her mouth, and although the muscles of her face work painfully, as though moved by some uncontrollable inward emotion, there is no lack of strength or determination in her face. "Shameful, shameful!" she murmurs. "I thought him careless, thoughtless; but cruel and unjust! No; I did not think him that! Oh, how can I ever speak to him again? I am so utterly disappointed! But I will speak to him, though! He shall know how hateful, how despicable such conduct is! Those poor people! My heart aches for them. But papa will do something for them. They shall not suffer so!"

"Good-morning, Miss Dysart. You are more than usually energetic to-day. I assure you I have pursued you at full speed through the last two fields."

Mona's heart stood still as she turned round and confronted Ralph Churton. She bowed coldly, and would have passed on; but he saw something was amiss, and asked, eagerly, "Miss Dysart, why this manner? Have I been so unfortunate as to offend you?"

"You have done nothing to offend me particularly," she answered, speaking very slowly and distinctly; "but I have made a discovery this morning which convinces me that I cannot honestly profess any longer to feel pleasure in your society."

"As you will," he said, looking very dark and angry; but adding, after a moment, with an attempt to turn it into a joke, "What new crime do you lay to my charge?"

He tried to put on the careless mock-air of humility which he generally assumed when she lectured him; but in his heart he felt there was something more than ordinary amiss, and that she had that on her mind which he would not be able to laugh away.

Why should he trouble himself about the silly child's fit of temper?

She is really excessively rude, and yet he cannot bear her to think ill of him!

She did not answer his question at first, and he repeated it, adding:

"It is only fair that you should let me know your discovery! The meanest criminal knows the offense for which he is condemned! You, who pique yourself on your justice, must see this?"

"Can it be necessary to explain when I tell you that I have just come from Lennox, and

have heard the story of three ruined homes there?"

"I am as profoundly ignorant as ever, and cannot see what this has to do with the case."

"Mr. Churton, you will not understand, and it is not my place to interfere with your manner of managing your own property; but I am at liberty to refuse all acquaintance with a man utterly devoid of humanity and generosity!"

"That is strong! And I have right to know your reasons for this conclusion—a right I mean to exercise too!"

His eyes glitter now, and he has a quiet look of determination which Mona has never seen before.

For a moment she trembles before him, and wishes—ah, so much!—that she had not found out all this miserable affair.

She wishes he were not so cruel, and for a moment cannot believe it; but then the recollection of the utter desolation that she has just witnessed recurs to her, and she steels her heart resolutely against all wavering.

"I will tell you, since you insist; and having said so much, I acknowledge the justice of your demand. But remember, it can do no good, for nothing can ever make me alter my mind, nor will you care to see me again when you hear what I have to say."

"Go on," he said, moodily. "I dare say it is nothing much more heinous than usual. I am a fool to force myself on you when you have taken so much pains to inform me that I am detestable."

"It is much worse than anything else that I have ever said before," she cried passionately; "for until to-day, although I was often vexed by your manner, I thought that it was but the outside, and that your heart was true and good, but now I find it is hard as flint. I find that the man whom I looked upon as being even culpably indulgent is the cruel owner of those dens which have been the origin of this year's misery to scores of poor families, and that now, when his tenants are reduced to the last extremities through his neglect, he has seized their furniture and turned them out of house and home, either to take refuge in the poor-house or to die on the roads!"

He flinched before the withering scorn of her voice, but again he tried to turn off the subject.

"On my word of honor, Miss Dysart, I know nothing of this; so your anger falls on the innocent! May I not be pardoned and taken into favor again?"

"I have nothing to pardon," she said, attempting to go. "I pity your victims, and will find some way of relieving them, but I do not presume to do more."

"They are not my victims. I am not the tyrant you think. I could not tell you the name of any of my smaller tenants. Bryant has always managed the whole affair."

"And can you urge that as an excuse?" she cried, turning round again and looking at him with eyes of indignation, while her lips curled scornfully. "Are you not the one to know of these things? Is it not a solemn duty for you to look after the welfare of those poor creatures, your tenants? But I forget myself. It is not my duty to remind you of myself. I have explained, and the matter is at an end. Good-morning, Mr. Churton?"

"You are eloquent," he said, ironically, and yet feeling the truth of her reproaches. "Remember, I never profess to sympathize as you do with the laboring man. I cannot regard him as a hero; and I dare say these favorites of yours are like the rest of them, and that Bryant knows they are incorrigible."

"It is useless for you to keep me here, Mr. Churton. It is a subject upon which we are not likely to agree, and I have no wish to appear to dictate to you in any way."

"But I want you to look at the matter coolly, Miss Dysart. I am not joking now. I do really value your good opinion, or I wouldn't trouble you. Bryant has managed my real estate ever since I was a boy, and un-

derstands it perfectly, while I have not the slightest aptitude for that sort of thing. I should be in an awful fix without him."

"I do not ask you to do without him"—forgetting her disavowal of asking him to do anything; "I only want you to look into matters, and see that innocent people are not treated unjustly in your name."

"I will do that, Miss Dysart; but I dare say it is all right, and that he either did not know of their distress, or knows them to be unworthy. I would do a great deal to win your good opinion, and my own, too, for that matter. For you make me feel that I am a brute. You are the only woman whom I really ever tried to please, and it seems that I am never to succeed."

"I am sorry you have wasted so much energy upon such a worthless object. A little of it directed elsewhere might have attained your end. But I might have known that it was not to be expected that you would give up a part of your comfort to add a little to those who have so much claim upon you."

"You will not alter your mind?"

"Not unless you alter your conduct. Good-morning, Mr. Churton, and good-by."

"Good-morning, Miss Dysart, but not good-by."

She walked quickly on, and he stood looking after her, with conflicting emotions on his face, which had lost its usual careless smile of imperturbable good-humor.

"She sha'n't turn me off like that," he said, with a frown. "I'll make her care for me, little witch! I am a perfect fool; and yet, by George! I felt like a blackguard when she looked at me with those great eyes of hers and told me that I was a useless cumberer of the earth. Somehow, I believe it's true. It isn't at all quite right. And those poor wretches, too! I'll see after them, at any rate. She shall know that I can work when I will, and that I am not so contemptible as she makes me out. But yet I believe she does mind, let her try to carry it off as she will; and what's more, I know I do. I would do anything just now for her sake, confound it, and she won't see it!"

The thought of Ada came into his mind, and he wondered how it was that he could ever have thought her Mona's superior.

"She is nice, and very lovely," he thought; "but Mona is—well, she's Mona, and that's all I seem to care about just now. Ah! Miss Dysart, you may turn me off, but I mean to exert myself in earnest this time, and for a prize worth winning, too!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A CRUEL WRONG.

IN the dusk of the afternoon Mona drew a low chair to Ada's side and told her all that had passed that morning. Ada's hand grew very cold, and she said, in an odd, sharp voice:

"How could you do it, Mona? You have no right to lecture people. He will never forgive you!"

"I don't want him to," said Mona, proudly. "I shall never forgive him. Oh, Ada, I am so disappointed! Don't you understand? I never thought he was like that."

"He never tried to appear different. You have always been rude and overbearing to him. I wonder he ever came to the house. But I thought your good taste would have prevented a scene like this. Just think how he must have felt!"

"I don't believe he feels at all. He is too hard-hearted and cruel. He liked to come over here because we amused him; but I don't believe he is capable of feeling any friendship for any one!"

"It is false!"—the words were abrupt and angry. "You have no right to judge people so intolerantly. He can never come here again!"

"I am sorry you are vexed about it, Ada. But I would rather he didn't come. I never want to see him again!"

There was a hysterical sob in her voice, but Ada did not notice it, and said:

"It is selfish of you to have consulted only yourself in the matter."

"Ada, you are scarcely just to me now. What has come between us, dear? I feel that you do not love me now as you did, and I cannot think what I have done. Do tell me, Ada, for I love you, and indeed I need your love very much, for I feel so miserable."

Ada did not answer, but looked away into the fire. Were not Mona's words true? Something had grown up between them, but she would not acknowledge that that something was jealousy.

She only murmured to herself:

"He cares for her opinion; can it be that he loves her? No, no, it cannot be! She is such a child, and he must see that she does not like him."

Mona lost no time in appealing to her father on behalf of her persecuted *proteges*, and grew eloquent as she placed their cause before him.

He gave her permission to do as she liked, and promised to find employment for the men, and after his daughter had left the room opened his mind on the subject to Ada.

"I am so glad to find my child unspoiled by prosperity, Miss Dalkeith, and feel so grateful to you for the good example and influence you have given."

Ada's heart glowed at this praise. Somehow, we are doubly grateful for a little encouragement when we feel that we are in the wrong. It is so grateful to be put into conceit with one's self.

Ada began to review the past, and to think that, after all, she had done Mona a lot of good. It was absurd to reproach herself if she had been annoyed a little bit lately. Of course the freshness of their situation had gone off, and Mona was trying. So she felt quite inclined to pursue the conversation with Mr. Dysart, although not quite certain whether this beginning pointed.

"I promised once to tell you the story of Mona's bringing up," he continued, after a pause. "Would it fatigue you if I told you now?"

"Not at all. I am very anxious to hear it."

"Thanks; I want you to know it, for it will make you understand much that must seem very odd to you now."

He spoke rather hurriedly, and Ada noticed that he was even more nervous than usual.

Passing his hand over his eyes, as though removing the mist which separated him from events of past years, he began:

"About twenty-one years ago I left America vowing never to return, for I was young and hot-blooded, and had been betrayed by one to whom I had surrendered myself body and soul. I was madly, passionately in love, and would have sacrificed anything for her sake. But the infatuation did not last long when I found that I had been utterly deceived—that the woman who had sworn to be my wife turned me off with a laugh when she found that she would not have wealth if she married me. Well, I was a young fool then, for, because one woman had deceived me, I made up my mind that there was no true, faithful women at all—at any rate, in that class.

"When I had been a short time in New Zealand I met Mona's mother. She was much older than I, but very beautiful, and obtained great influence over me, so that partly from pique, and partly from a strange infatuation, I married her after we had been acquainted a few months. She was very passionate, and had an iron will, but I believe she loved me intensely, and would have made me a true wife had it not been for unhappy circumstances. It is needless to say that I was so guilty as to have married without feeling one scrap of affection. This she soon found out, and it maddened her. I shall never forget the scenes that followed. I tried when too late to make amends for my earlier neglect, but in vain. She would have none of my attentions, and gave way to the

most violent outbursts of passion, which I soon found were heightened by habits of intemperance. You may well shudder. It was an awful life. After a year our little one was born, and within another the mother died raving mad, and breathing to the last threats of hatred and denunciation on me and her child. Sometimes I feared for Mona when I saw she had inherited her mother's passionate temper. Do you wonder?"

"I do not," said Ada. "But does she know?"

"No, thank Heaven! I have never mentioned her mother's name to her, for I wish her, if she ever thinks of her at all, to think of her as loving and gentle, and worthy of an affectionate remembrance."

"Thank you for this confidence. She shall never learn it from me."

"I can trust you. Ah, Miss Dalkeith, I am not an old man, and yet sometimes I feel that my life has well-nigh gone, and has been a wasted one."

"You must not say that," she said, really feeling sorry for him, thinking what he had suffered. "What would Mona do without you, and all of us? Believe me, I am not ungrateful for all the kindness I have received in your house."

"I am proud to think you have been happy here," he said. "You have greatly added to its sunshine, and I am selfish enough to wish that we might hope always to keep you."

He looked wistfully into her blue eyes as he spoke, and Ada's conscience smote her.

"But I will try to be grateful," she reflected. "And I have been happy here."

For some weeks Mona was strangely absent and unlike herself, and Ada felt that she had something on her mind, and pretty well guessing what it was.

Nor was she surprised when, one morning, Mona came up to her with a more radiant face than she had worn for some time.

"I am so glad, dear! You were quite right and I wrong. I will never judge people again. What do you think has happened?"

Ada's heart thumped against her side; but she said quietly, "What has happened, dear? Please tell me; I am so curious, and cannot guess."

"The tenements at the east end of South street, in Lennox, are to be pulled down and new ones built. Mrs. Green has just told me all about it. Mr. Churton has been so busy looking into things himself. Only think! he has inquired into the cases of all the poor people Bryant turned out, and given all of them work to do. Oh, I am so glad!"

"It is very nice," said Ada.

But her heart by no means echoed the sentiment. She was seized with a sickening fear that trouble was near.

"And now, I suppose, you have forgiven the delinquent and made friends again?"

There was a great lump in her throat, and she felt it would be a great relief to give one long, agonized scream.

"I don't suppose he cares about my forgiveness," said Mona, bending down to look into a beautiful rose, so that the quivering of her lips should not be noticed. "But I am glad he has turned out well after all. It made me miserable to think he could be so willfully cruel and unjust."

They were walking arm-in-arm round the garden, and just now a footfall sounded on the gravel behind them, and turning, they saw the object of their conversation.

"The servants told me you were here," he said. "I was bold enough to come in search of you. How do you do, Miss Dalkeith? It is long since I saw you. May I speak to you, Miss Dysart, or—"

He looked very humble, and even ill at ease.

"I am very pleased to see you here again," said Mona, looking herself rather confused.

"Thank you," he said, holding out his hand

impulsively. "May I be your friend now, or do you still intend to repudiate me?"

She did not answer, but silently gave him her hand, which he wrung with fervor, saying:

"I have much to be grateful to you for, Miss Dysart. Some day I will ask you for even more than your friendship, if you will help me to become worthy."

Mona blushed, and he saw that she partly understood his meaning.

"Yes," he went on, after they had walked on a few steps; "you have often made me feel ashamed of myself; but that last time you stirred up so much in my mind that I had to face the matter fairly. Well, I won't trouble you with my reflections, for they weren't pleasant; but I found out that I was something very like a scoundrel, and that I must either turn over a new leaf or forfeit my own self-respect."

"I am very glad you did think," she said. "But I am afraid my work will have to change now. I shall have as much trouble in making you entertain a proper respect for yourself as I had before in destroying it."

"Do you think, then, I am worthy of any respect?" he asked, bending nearer to her.

"Well, just a little," she said, smiling.

"And have I yours? I know your friendship will not go without it."

"Yes," she answered, in a very low voice; but the "Yes" sounded very emphatic for all that.

Ada had hurried away, feeling that for her the world was coming to an end. Seeking out a secluded spot, she pressed her hands to her burning temples, making a sort of moaning, sobbing cry of pain.

"Cruel! cruel! I hate her! She does not love him. She has never liked him. It is all childish vanity, and he— Oh, does he really love her? What could that child know of love? And yet he was ready to lay down all before her, capricious and willful as she was! It was a mad infatuation—a wicked infatuation. It made all wrong. Did he not know that Charlie loved Mona? What right has he to steal his friend's love? And then Mr. Dysart's revelation! He would never marry her did he know that. No; it was all wrong. Things could never go on so. Some one must intervene."

Ada started with repulsion at the wicked thoughts which filled her mind, and tried to recall all Mona's love and generosity to her.

She hurried indoors, and, choosing a retired path, met no one, but she heard Mona and her companion still walking about and talking, and her face blanched with an awful agony as their voices fell on her ear.

"It cannot—shall not be!" she said, clasping her hand so tightly that the nails pierced the delicate white skin.

Two men were driving in a dog-cart to the station at Lennox to catch the night express.

"You'll look after things for me, Cranleigh?" said the one in a dull, despondent voice. "And, old fellow, let me know how things go, and—about her."

"I will. You mustn't stay too long. Remember, work awaits you here."

"But I'm right to go now, eh?" (as though he would almost like to receive a negative answer).

"Yes; I think so. It's very hard for you, though."

"It is, confound it! I say, Cranleigh, drive round there. We've plenty of time."

"All right!"

Very few words were spoken until Ralph had got into the train. Then, with a hearty wring of his companion's hand, he said in a husky voice, "Don't let her think more hardly of me than can be helped, and pray let me know about her." He clinched his teeth, and as the train moved out of the little station he looked out of the window until the last trace of the place was far distant. Then, covering his face with his hands, he muttered, "It's a

cruel fate, and for her it's worse; for she will never understand it. I was a fool to speak to her at all. Poor little thing! what a fate for her! I shall go mad if I think of it much longer."

CHAPTER IX.

A SUDDEN DEPARTURE.

"WELL, this is an odd start!" exclaimed Charlie Talbot, coming into the room where Mona and Ada were sitting, the former busily engaged with painting, the latter fitfully trying to read.

"What is the matter?" asked Mona, at once.

Ada did not speak at all; but a careful observer would have seen that she was listening for the answer with painfully-strained attention.

"Churton has gone off to Egypt, and left all his affairs in Cranleigh's hands. It is rumored, or even more decidedly stated, that he will remain away several years."

Neither of his listeners made any remark.

Ada's hands clasped so convulsively the book that she held, that the binding gave way, while Mona looked up with an air of bewildered astonishment.

"Are you sure it is true?" she asked, at last.

"Quite. And the oddest part is that he had just begun really to take an interest in the place, and had commenced all sorts of improvements. He was always an odd fellow, but this beats all."

"I cannot help thinking there must be some mistake," Mona persisted. "Perhaps sudden business has called him away. Surely he would not go away for an indefinite time just when he has commenced so much."

"But he has, though. It is incomprehensible, and I only know that we shall miss him awfully. Eh, Miss Dalkeith? You say nothing. Are you not surprised?"

"Why should I be? Gentlemen who are at liberty so often take such freaks into their heads. Perhaps he was tired of the improvement system."

Had she grown quite brutalized lately? She almost hated herself. Mona looked up, with a proud, hurt look in her eyes; but she said nothing, and presently consented to Charlie's entreaty to walk with him in the garden.

"Mona, you don't mind this?" he asked, abruptly.

"Mind! Why should I trouble about Mr. Churton's movements?" she asked, proudly.

"Forgive me if I seem curious. But, oh, Mona, sometimes I felt jealous of him! He engrossed so much of your attention."

"Not so much as you do. Silly fellow! you are getting quite absurd."

"But you were always different when he was with you, Mona. I do want you to care about me a little. Do you know I care about you very much indeed?"

"Come, Charlie, let us go in. It is so cold out here."

"Yes, we'll go in now," he said, after a minute's pause. "But, Mona, I shall have to speak out some day."

"Please don't. It would be of no use."

"Ada, dear, are you not surprised at this?" said Mona, kneeling down by her friend's side after Charlie had gone away.

"I don't think about it, dear. Mr. Churton is at liberty to act as he chooses, and you know my doctrine is not to worry about other people's doings. So don't let us talk of it any more. The subject has grown so wearisome, and I am so tired."

"Poor Ada! You look so. Have you a headache, dear? You are so pale."

"Just a little; but it isn't anything worth troubling about. I want to be quiet only."

Her voice sounded as though quiet had been long and vainly sought, and Mona noticed its hollow, weary tone.

"I am afraid you are not happy, dear," she said. "Has any one been unkind to you? I wish you would tell me what you are worrying about."

"What is all this, Mona? It is so unlike you to make such a fuss about nothing."

Mona drew back, looking hurt.

"I am sorry that I trouble, I only wanted to comfort you."

"And I am very cross," she said, repentantly. "Mona, you have been too good to me, and spoilt me. Sometimes I wish that I had never come among you."

"Now, Ada, that is too unkind. You have brought us nothing but happiness. We could not have spared you, anyhow."

Her loving words cut Ada to the heart, and she lay back and closed her eyes, as though seeking repose. Mona, taking the hint, withdrew.

She wandered about for some time listlessly, and then calling Hector, set off for a brisk walk.

"This will never do," she said to herself, decisively. "If I have made a mistake, there is no need to publish the fact to the world."

Perhaps it was Hector's doing, for Mona had certainly followed his lead, that they bent their steps toward Lennox, where the improvements had already commenced. Arrived on the spot, Mona thought she might as well visit some of her humble friends, and tapped at the door of the cottage lying nearest to her.

A neat, pleasant-featured woman opened it and greeted her visitor with evident delight.

"Good-afternoon!"

"Mrs. Fitch, may I come in?"

"Ay, do, miss! Your face is good for sore hearts, and sore ours should be just now when the master's gone away to furrin parts, just as he was a-beginning to look arter things a bit."

"You have heard the news, then?" said Mona.

"Deed I have, miss, more's the pity, too. He come here just afore startin', and sees your picter on the table, and, would ye believe it, he went and stood a-lookin' at it for nigh on ten minutes, and just afore he went he says, 'Mrs. Fitch, will you do me a favor?' 'That I will' says I. 'Well,' says he, 'if you will give me this 'ere picter of Miss Dysart; I'm a-goin' away from all my friends, and I should like to take something to remind me of 'em.' Well, miss, I couldn't ha' gainsaid him, he'd been so very good to me and my man; and it wasn't for the sake of the gold-piece he give me, miss, believe me, for I was loath to part wi' yer picter, but he did look so yearnin' like, and I thinks maybe he haven't the courage to ask you for one for hisself, and gived it him. You ain't offended, miss?"

"Of course not."

The tell-tale blood rushed to her cheeks, and after she had left the cottage her heart was much lighter, for ever and ever again the thought recurred, "He does love me, then, or why should he have taken my likeness. Surely he will come back soon? I cannot have been mistaken."

But the news is confirmed on every side. Churton Court is shut up, and its master's absence lamented by all, so Mona is at length obliged to give up her incredulity, and accept the state of affairs.

She makes no complaint—indeed, she has no one to complain to just now, for the gulf between Ada and herself seems to widen every day, and she would feel it impossible to confide in her even had she not resolved to stifle every recollection of her former hopes.

"I was a fool to think of him," she said. "Of course he only looked on me as a childish, ignorant girl, very well to amuse himself with, but not worthy of serious thought."

Yet every one is very kind to her just now. All the old grievances of her life seem to have vanished to give place to the new troubles, the coldness of Ada, and his—well, not deceit exactly—but something very like heartless trifling with her affections.

Charlie is generally at Dene-Chase some time during the day, and so long as he keeps off one dangerous topic, Mona is always glad of his society; and Mrs. Talbot frequently drives over

to fetch her back to Hillside, where she is now a great favorite.

There are no complaints and reproofs now. Mona is not quite sure whether the change is with herself or them, but enjoys the new state of things without troubling herself as to the cause.

But yet she is not happy. A shadow seems to have fallen over her life, and a great blank into the long, bright, summer days. The sun never seems to shine so brightly now, nor the birds to sing so sweetly as they did last year.

It is now nearly twelve months since Ralph Churton first crossed her path. What a long year it has been! Charlie is just reminding her of their first meeting, as they stand by the old willow-tree where it took place.

"You looked so angry, Mona, and yet so beautiful! I was bewitched at first sight! Do you remember it?"

"Perfectly. Mr. Churton came first, and you followed to make peace. I am afraid I was very rude to both of you. Ada lectured me dreadfully afterward, and said I should make every one think me detestable!"

"Did she? I don't think there was ever much danger of it, and I am afraid that some of us care for you too much for our own peace of mind."

He had taken it into his head lately that Ralph had gone away because Mona had refused him.

"You have worn the love of everybody; even mother and Marion are obliged to give in, and I—well, I loved you from the first minute. Mona, do you think I should be a very difficult fellow to love?"

"No, indeed; I think you very nice, and love you dearly!"

"Do you really? Oh, Mona, you have made me so happy!"

"I mean as your sister. You are my dear old cousin; that is almost the same as a brother, you know."

"No; I don't know," he said, gloomily. "It's a very different thing, and I don't want to be your brother at all. Mona, I want you all to myself, to like me better than any one else!"

"Do you? But I am afraid that cannot be."

She would not look up into the honest eyes which she knew were full of yearning, tender love, for she could not trust herself. It was such a temptation to accept this freely offered heart, whose sincerity she could not doubt, for she was very lonely; and yet—no, she dared not. It would be cruel to him and cruel to her.

"Now, Charlie, don't talk any more about it," she continued. "It's of no use at all. I don't mean to marry—at any rate, not for a long time."

"Well, I'll wait for you any time!" he said, patiently.

"But I shall never be able to marry you, Charlie. Do be sensible. I tell you it is useless!"

"I can't help it, Mona. When I see you I must speak; and when I think of you I must see you; and as you are always in my thoughts, naturally I am always here. I shall go on hoping until you show me it is hopeless."

"How can I do that?" she asked.

"By marrying some one else."

"That is impossible!"

"Then I shall go on hoping and asking."

"What babies you men are!" she exclaimed, impatiently. "A woman can always hold her tongue if she was in trouble; you must cry out, and can hide nothing!"

"I thought you admired openness, and hated concealment!"

"So I do; but this is a different thing. Oh, Charlie, I am so vexed with you! We might be so happy, if you would only let us!"

"It is you, Mona, who spoil it. I will be as happy as a king if you will let me, and try to make you happy, too. Now I am miserable. Mona, do try, dear; I will be very patient if you will only give me hope!"

"I really can't, Charlie! It is cruel to ask me so!"

And for the moment her large brown eyes softened, and he saw they were full of tears.

"Forgive me!" he said, softly; "I won't worry you any more!"

CHAPTER X.

AT WAR WITH HERSELF.

ADA was sitting conning a short letter very diligently. There were only a few lines, but she took a long time to consider them, and although her writing materials were ready at hand, she made many turns up and down the room before she seated herself to begin a reply.

Just as she had done so, a nervous knock was heard at the door, and in answer to her "Come in," Mr. Dysart entered, looking very pale and anxious.

"Excuse this intrusion, Miss Dalkeith," he said; "I was too impatient to wait for an answer to my note; and after I had sent it, it seemed so brief and abrupt, and left so much unexplained, that I felt I could plead my cause much better in person! Have you considered my plea?"

"Yes," she answered; "and, Mr. Dysart, I am more than grateful to you for the honor you have done me; but I am very perplexed! Have you considered all the consequences of this step?"

"Considered!" he echoed. "Have I not dreamt of them day and night, even when I thought all pretension to your hand was hopeless? Miss Dalkeith, do not smile at my eagerness! To you, perhaps, I may seem to be getting an old man, but I can honestly say that the love I bear you is strong and true as the youngest lover's you might have at your feet! Remember what my life has been! You know it all! I will not say that I never loved before, for I did truly and passionately love the woman who ruined all my early life; but that love died when I found that she was false and heartless as she was beautiful! And, as you know, my poor wife never held the place that rightfully belongs to a woman in her husband's heart! To you, then, I offer not the first love, but the first love worth having, for it is founded on esteem as much as on passion! This love has grown every day since you have been in my house! I have tried to conceal it, knowing that it was almost hopeless, and believe, that had I seen you happy with any one else, I would have stood aside and wished you all the happiness in life that is possible! But this has changed now! I feel that the impression I have been laboring under for some time must have been a false one! Will you come to me, Ada, and give me that incomparable happiness of having the right to protect you?"

She covered her face with her hands, and all seemed darkness within and without.

The perplexity of her mind was almost maddening. Recollections of bygone hopes, actions, and words rushed through her mind, and she felt that she could not accept this offer. But then she could not doubt the sincerity of his love, and why should she refuse to make him happy when all chance of her own felicity had vanished forever?

But Mona! She rose like a reproachful shadow, and Ada thought, "Can I bear to have her always in my sight? How she will hate me when she knows that I have taken her father's love too!"

Mr. Dysart was standing patiently before her, waiting for an answer.

He was a very handsome man, and looked even younger than he was; and Ada felt that it would not be impossible to be happy with him.

"I will not hurry you," he said. "I do not expect you to give me much of your love now. I will be satisfied with winning it in time if you will but accept mine."

"It is all so strange!" she murmured. "I cannot decide; there are so many things to think of. How would Mona bear it? She is

too old to care for any one to take her mother's place now."

"I did not think that would be a hindrance," he said, sadly. "I know a woman does not care to marry a man who has a daughter nearly as old as herself; but I fancied that in this case there was a slight difference. You have always seemed so deeply attached, and Mona would be very glad to have you in a closer relationship and delighted at the thought of being always with you."

Ada smiled bitterly.

Clearly he knew nothing of the gulf which had opened of late between the two friends. But why should she heed it? She would take just this one step more, and perhaps then the rough ways of her life might become smoother. As Mr. Dysart's wife she would try in some measure to rectify the errors of Ada Dalkeith, and set her own tortured conscience at rest.

"I will raise no more difficulty," she said. "Mr. Dysart, the honor you have done me is a great one, and I will try to be worthy of it. You shall never repent the goodness which made you take a homeless, friendless woman to be your wife."

He took her hand, which she allowed to lie passively in his, and said, very earnestly, "And you shall never repent this, the greatest of all your acts of kindness to me."

She shuddered violently as she said: "I will try, Mr. Dysart, to make you a good wife."

All the old graceful lightness of her manner had vanished, and he looked with tender solicitude into the pale, weary face.

"I must begin at once to take care of you, my Ada. You need it sadly. Darling, you must drop that old, stiff formula now, and remember that I am Mr. Dysart to you no longer. It will be very sweet to me to hear my name from your dear lips; it is so many years since I heard it from one I loved. Try, dear, to forget that you are marrying an old man."

"I don't want to forget, Hugh," she said, pressing her hands together, as though to still some violent inward pain.

She would conquer herself and endeavor to make him happy, and did not draw back when he put his arm round her and said, "Ada, we must seal our compact with a kiss."

She submitted to his embrace, and even returned it; but the repulsion she felt in her heart told her that she had committed a mistake.

"I am very tired"—after a pause. "Please let me rest now; and will you tell Mona?"

"Of course. I see already the delight with which she will hear the news."

Ada smiled sadly at his mistake; and when he had gone, leaned her head on the table and groaned, "Has it ended thus? Oh, I cannot bear it! The punishment is greater than I can endure! And I meant to have acted so differently! But now I have ruined the best and only friend I ever had! Mona, Mona! how shall I bear to see you when you know this? Ingrate that I am! You were so generous, and offered me so much, and I have taken all—lover, father, and home! This will torture me to death or madness! If she would but marry Charlie, it might be all right! I would try to make Mr. Dysart happy, and I will—I will forget! But with Mona—no; I cannot live with her! It would kill me! If she will not, we must go away, for I dare not turn her out of her own father's house—the house she welcomed me to when I was friendless and poor!"

The picture of the warm, loving greeting rose before the miserable girl's mind until she loathed herself, and felt that she would do anything to break the fetters that had been forged by her own weakness.

Mr. Dysart was fairly astonished at Mona's reception of his news.

He had pictured to himself her joy; instead of that, she flung herself into his arms, with a burst of passionate, hysterical weeping.

"Oh, papa, papa, then I have not even your affection any longer?"

"Mona, what is this? I thought you loved

Ada too well to be jealous of her, or to fear that she would take my love from you. Do you suppose for one minute that even a wife could drive my little girl from my heart?"

"I am not jealous, papa, but I cannot be glad. It is all so sudden and strange."

How could she tell him of the change which had taken place?

It was only something else to conceal, she reflected, bitterly; and added, with a mechanical smile: "This is not a very nice way to receive your news. I shall soon get used to it, and hope you will both be very happy."

"Thanks, darling. And you? I cannot have my little girl think herself neglected."

"I will be willing to share what was once mine entirely. It was very silly of me to mind at first."

"And remember, pet, your share is no smaller than it was before. Your poor old father's heart has grown larger, that is all. It is all right now, eh?"—looking anxiously at her.

"Yes, papa, quite—quite right. I am glad to see you looking so happy."

"Ada, papa has told me all about it," said Mona, feeling that a beginning must be made somehow. "I hope you will both be very happy."

"Thank you, dear!"

There was an awkward pause, to break which Ada at last said:

"I shall feel quite a matron with my grown-up daughter."

Mona smiled.

"But I suppose I must not hope to keep my daughter long."

"What do you mean, Ada?" in genuine surprise.

"Do you think I have not noticed?"—speaking playfully, while her heart throbbed violently with a painful excitement. "I know some one who is very anxious to deprive us of you. Is he not to have his reward, Mona?"

The girl flushed a deep crimson.

"Please don't, Ada. He understands that it can never be."

"I don't think he does," said Ada. "I know that it would take a great deal to make him give up hoping; and, Mona, you ought not to trifle with him. I think he has a right to expect something better from you."

"Certainly he has," said Mona. "I hope that I would not trifle with any man who did me the honor of asking me to be his wife."

"You have allowed Charlie to think so differently, and now it is heartless to throw him over. I consider that you are bound to accept him."

"Ada, I cannot think you believe this, it is so utterly untrue. I will not be in your way; but even for the sake of ridding you of my company I cannot consent to be the wife of a man whom I do not love."

She left the room, not daring to trust herself there any longer.

"Feel herself regarded as an intruder, indeed!" she exclaimed, bitterly. "She need not fear that; it is rather I who will have to feel that."

She felt so insulted and hurt that Ada should have tried so soon to make her understand the change in their mutual positions.

"How can I ever bear it?" was the thought uppermost in her mind.

Perhaps her heart might have softened had she seen the beautiful kneeling form convulsed in an agony of remorse, and heard the bitter cry, "It is useless; I can never undo what I have done, and now she is alienated more than ever! Oh, to get away—away from this hateful spot! And he will surely take me hence, if I but ask him!"

She rested on that comfort. Her weak nature must have some support; and it was a solace to think that there was some one whose whole thoughts were devoted to her happiness; and yet when he was near she had to school herself to endure his touch or voice.

CHAPTER XI.

ALL AGAINST HER.

THE wedding took place very soon, for Mr. Dysart would hear of no long postponement; and Ada felt that perhaps when it was over, and she was away, she might enjoy rest from the fever and remorse and vain longing which tormented her. So the summer had not yet flown when Mona stood in her bride-maid's dress looking from the hall-door after the retreating carriage which was bearing her father and his new-made bride away.

It was the first time in her life that she had ever been separated from him, and there was a cruel feeling of desolation in her heart. The world had grown very dark lately, and it seemed almost incomprehensible. To her warm, impulsive heart it was awful to feel repulsed or deceived on every side, and to have the necessity for concealment. She was in danger of growing hard and cynical.

"I suppose I expected too much," she would say. "Aunt Margaret is wise, after all, and I don't think her estimate of the world is very wrong."

Poor child! she did not dream that the little corner which she knew was anything but the world. It was enough for her that she had come in contact with any part of it, and that that part had proved very hard and unpleasant.

"But I won't be conquered by it," was her resolve. "No one shall see that I am miserable, and I won't be miserable long, either. What if people choose to be false, why should I mind? Others contrive to be happy, and so will I. I am not so weak that I cannot do without the love of one or two people, and surely I am not mean-spirited enough to cling on to those who want to shake me off? And yet to be forsaken by all!"

At that moment, Hector put his nose caressingly into her hand, as much as to say, "Don't say you are forsaken by all! Haven't you got me? And you know I never thought much of your other friend."

Mona remembered the animal's dislike to Ada from the first, and now felt that it must have been his unerring instinct which enabled him to distinguish friend from foe.

"And yet, Ada, surely you were my friend? I cannot bear to think you quite false; and Hector made one mistake, for he always liked that other one. Come, old fellow, we'll go for a long walk, and get rid of these blue feelings. Wait till I've changed my dress, and then we'll go to see some of the poor people. I dare say they may be false, as all the rest; but, at any rate, they don't prosper in their falsehood; and when people are unhappy, one can forgive them a great deal."

"The wedding-bells were still pealing noisily as the faithful pair set off, and their harsh, metallic voices jarred painfully on Mona's sensitive ears.

"How unreal it all seems!" she thought. "I cannot realize what has happened! The same, and yet, oh, how different! It can never be the same again!"

The visiting was not successful that day; for go wherever she would, only one topic of conversation prevailed.

"It'll be a great change for you, miss," said one old dame. "But your new 'ma ain't quite strange; so you won't be mindin' so much like. You'll find it lonely till they come back, though."

"I sha'n't be at home. My aunt has invited me to stay with her," said Mona.

"That'll be more cheery for you. Dene-Chase is a big, lonesome place for a young lady like you, miss, and there'll be many as will feel the happier for seein' you at Mrs. Talbot's."

Mona laughed and the old woman continued: "You'll not think me rude, I hope, but I'm an old woman, and it makes my heart light to see young people happy, particular such a dear young lady as you've been to us."

"Thank you, Mrs. Porter; it is very kind of you to say so."

"And, miss, I would tell there's not one in

the village but is pleased to think as you'll stay here for good."

"Of course I shall stay! Isn't it my home?"

"Ay, miss! But many young ladies is took from their homes; and it would be heart-breakin' to see you go."

"Ah, you needn't fear! No one will take me, and I have made up my mind never to go."

"Not far, miss. But Mr. Talbot, I'm thinking, wouldn't like to hear you say that! He's a fine young gentleman, and we all wish you may both be very happy."

"Mrs. Porter, this is quite a mistake. There is nothing between Mr. Talbot and myself. We are only very dear cousins."

She took her leave soon, and hurried away from the village, pursued by one miserable thought.

Ada's words, "You have allowed Charlie to think so differently, and now you cannot be so heartless as to throw him over," were ringing in her ears, bringing the horrible doubt that she might perhaps have acted unfairly by him.

"I am no better than the rest of them," was the bitter reflection. "It is very hard that one should make such mistakes when one really wishes to do right!"

The days at her aunt's passed very slowly, and Mona felt something like a caged bird.

She would have insisted on returning to Dene-Chase had it not been for the fear of appearing ungrateful.

Several letters had come from Mr. Dysart, and one from Ada; but such a cold, formal one, which bore decided evidences of letter-making rather than letter-writing simply.

"Why does she write at all?" reflected Mona, bitterly. "I would rather have no letters than one like this!"

They talked of remaining abroad all the winter, but nothing was mentioned about her joining them, and Mona felt that it was meant to be understood that she should not do so.

It galled the proud heart to think that she could not prevent herself dwelling on this.

"No one wants me now!" was the sad, bitter cry which often went from her tortured, wounded spirit.

But there was one, after all, who did want her very much, and sometimes the thought of his love almost brought relief to her.

"Poor Charlie! I feel almost driven to take refuge in his love. It would be so sweet to have some one to look after and care for me again."

Mrs. Talbot was a shrewd observer, and saw much that was passing in her niece's mind; nor did she lose an opportunity of reminding her, in an indirect way, of the change which she would find at home after the newly-married couple returned.

"Of course, Mrs. Dysart was always very fond of you when she was Miss Dalkeith, and I don't doubt that she will always be so; but still I feel sure, dear Mona, that you will understand that a young married woman, who is remarkably pretty, will find it awkward to have such a tall, attractive daughter. I am so afraid, my dear, that this will trouble you."

"What can I do?" cried Mona, fairly exasperated at the plain expression of her own reflections. "Would you have me leave my father's house and live alone?"

"That would be very foolish; but I cannot help hoping that these circumstances may help to decide a certain affair in favor of my dear boy's happiness."

That everlasting subject again!

Mona shrugged her shoulders impatiently, but was silent as Mrs. Talbot went on:

"Charlie offers you such a love as seldom falls to any woman's lot, and knowing what a home awaits you if you will accept it, I wonder you can choose to return for good to your father's."

"Aunt, I would rather not discuss this matter," said Mona, decisively. "It is very kind of you to be so willing to welcome me into your family, but it can never be."

Mrs. Talbot said no more; but as she noticed the weary, worn look on Mona's face, she felt that time would do more than all her arguments.

"She will never bear life at Dene-Chase again," was her confident reflection; and it imbibed Mona's trouble to feel this, too. Oh, how willingly she would have refuted those innuendoes about Ada had she been able! But the truth was so clear that it was impossible to deny it. "Oh, Ada! how can it be, after we have loved each other so dearly?"

It was still harder when Charlie pleaded his own cause with a simple, manly earnestness that touched her very powerfully, or when Amy, whom she had really learnt to love, put her arms round her waist, and whispered, lovingly:

"Dear old Mona, I wish you would always stay with us, and let us make you happy!"

Meanwhile Ada and her husband were wandering from one place to another. Nowhere did she find the peace of mind so ardently wished for; and yet, when Mr. Dysart proposed returning home, she negatived the proposal with vehement decisiveness. Yet she was very gentle and affectionate toward him, and found some relief for her tortured spirit in the reflection that she had ministered to his happiness.

They had been staying for some weeks at Florence, and Mr. Dysart began to hope that she was really interested at last, and would settle down for some time.

She was sitting alone in the hotel, when a card was brought to her, which sent the blood in a rush to her face, to recede as rapidly, leaving her deadly pale. On the card was,

"Ralph Churton."

"I thought you were in Egypt," she said faintly, as he entered.

"So I was, until a few weeks ago," he answered; "but a demon of unrest has seized me, and I am compelled to wander about from place to place, longing only for one spot, which is forbidden ground to me."

"And that is—"

"Dene-Chase," he answered, quietly. "Yes, Mrs. Dysart; I need not mind you, for you must know what drove me away so suddenly from my home. Am I not right?"

"I cannot tell," she said, coldly. "You were always erratic in your movements."

"I should have thought the cause was plain enough to you; at least, it will be when I tell you my reason for coming to you is to ask for some news of Miss Dysart."

"Miss Dysart is well, I believe; she was when I last heard."

"And happy?"

"She should be, as she is staying with her aunt, where there is everything to make her so."

He started back as though he had received a sudden shock.

"What would you have me believe?" he said. "I cannot understand you!"

"There is no mystery about it," she answered.

"Then you mean that either Talbot and Mona are engaged, or will be so before long? That he is brave enough to dare the danger I was such a coward as to flee from?"

"I do not say this. I know nothing of Mona's plans. She does not make me her confidante."

Oh, how she longed to throw herself at his feet, and, with tears of repentance, confess all, begging for mercy and forgiveness! But she dared not. She could not recede now, and let him go away unenlightened, only feeling that never had she loved him so much, even in the days when she thought his love was hers.

The sound of Mr. Dysart's returning footsteps sent a thrill of horror through her frame.

"We must go away from here," she gasped to herself. "Oh, is there no corner of this world where a wretch such as I may hope to find peace?"

Before long her wish to be again on the move was imparted.

"Need we stay here any longer, dear Hugh? I think we have seen all—and I am so tired of the place!"

"Tired already, Ada? I had hoped that you were interested. Where shall we go now?"

"Where you will," she answered, listlessly, "only let us move from here."

"Shall we go home?"

"No, no; anywhere but there! I hate New England in the winter time, and it will be worse than ever after being so long in this beautiful climate."

"Don't you think, then," said Mr. Dysart, hesitatingly—"don't you think if we are to pass the winter abroad we ought to send for Mona? I fear she will feel herself so neglected."

Ada's eyes fell, and she said slowly, "Mona is so happy at her aunt's, Hugh; it would be a pity to disturb her."

"Do you think so? I am afraid for her, and it is so long since we have seen her."

"As you like, Hugh. I am sorry that I have not been able to make you happy."

"Don't say that, Ada! I have been happier with you these last few months than I ever was in my life before. The only trouble is that sometimes I fear you are not happy yourself. Tell me, dearest, is this so?"

"No, no!" she cried; "I am very happy, and only want to go from here because it is dull."

"Well, darling, when and where shall it be?"

"Where you will but soon—to-day, if possible!"

CHAPTER XII.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

"MONA, I can bear it no longer! Give me an answer some way or other!"

"I have given you one, Charlie, over and over again! It can never be anything different!"

"I cannot—cannot believe this, Mona! It is so hard to give up after all this time! Why will you not have me?"

"Simply I don't love you well enough to be your wife! That is surely sufficient!"

"Only tell me one thing, and I will ask you no more! Do you love any one else?"

Her honest brown eyes drooped before his, but he saw that it was the truth as she said, "I cannot tell you, Charlie, for I don't know myself."

"Then, Mona, why should I not hope? Surely my chance is as good as any one else's if you don't care for any one?"

"I don't care for any one, Charlie; but once I think I did, and I shall never care for any one else again. Please don't say any more now; I can't bear it."

He took her hand in his and pressed it warmly, saying, "I won't ask any more; but let me be your brother, Mona. You offered me that once, and I refused; but now I will be anything to you so long as you don't send me quite away."

"Will you really, Charlie? Oh! you have made me so happy! Sometimes I do so want a friend to help me, and now I shall look to you."

At that moment a servant entered with a telegram for Mona. She tore it open and glanced hastily at the contents.

Then she became deadly pale, and with trembling hands passed it to Charlie, who read:

"A dangerous accident has occurred. Your father and Mrs. Dysart are hurt, and she asks for you incessantly. Come at once."

It was some time before she could take in the words, awful as they were in their plainness.

The message was from New York, and was from Mrs. Dysart's maid.

"I will go with you, Mona," he said. "Let me begin my brotherly work at once."

"Thank you; only let us be quick. Cousin Janet must come too. She is so invaluable in time of sickness."

She spoke with a forced calmness, numbed with suspense and eagerness to start.

They traveled that night, and not a moment was lost upon the road, but they found that they were eagerly expected; and as they mounted the stairs of the hotel to which they had been directed, Upton, Mrs. Dysart's maid, came out and welcomed Mona.

"I am so glad you have come! My mistress is conscious, but is sinking rapidly. I feared she would not last until you arrived."

At those words, the estrangement of the last few months seemed to clear away in a moment, and Mona only remembered that the woman whom she had looked upon as her dearest friend was lying stricken down, soon to be separated from her forever. She trembled violently, and leaned on Charlie's arm for support.

"Courage!" he whispered. "Remember, the great thing is to be calm."

And then, after a few hurried inquiries after her father, who she heard was seriously hurt, but in no immediate danger, she followed Upton into the darkened room, where Ada Dysart, the beautiful and winning, lay at the point of death. Mona shuddered as she entered, for she feared to see that lovely face disfigured and lacerated, but there was no cause for dread of that kind. The incomparable features were lovely as ever, except for their pallor.

Ada looked up as Mona entered. "Ah, you have come!" she cried. "I thought I should have died before I had told you all, and it was awful to pass away with such guilt on my conscience!"

"Oh, hush, dear Ada! You must not talk of dying; you must get well again, and we will be happy, as we used to be."

"Get well, to be a hopeless cripple? Nay, Mona, had I as much to make life happy as I have to make it wretched, I could not wish it."

"Think, Ada, of us—of my father! What will he do?"

"Poor Hugh! Ah, Mona, you will have him again now. I was very, very cruel to you, but I will give you back all that I have robbed you of, before I die."

"Please don't speak so, Ada. It may not be so bad as you think. And you never robbed me of anything; for how could you help papa's loving you! It was foolish of me to be so jealous. I see it all now."

"Mona, you cannot. Your pure soul would be revolted did you see all my wickedness, my ingratitude, but you must know it now, before it is too late. I feared to be too weak to tell you, and have written it all here." She gave Mona a closed letter as she spoke. "Read that, and it will tell you the whole story. Then, oh, then be merciful to me! I never meant to betray you, Mona!"

Her hearer tried in vain to stop her revelation, seeing how painfully excited she was becoming.

Ada continued: "I cannot think how I could do it; but I loved him so, and it made me nearly mad. You would not have done it, dear. You would have stood on one side, had he loved me, and wished us happiness. But I could not. Mona, in all your trouble you cannot have known such torment as I have endured since I sent Ralph Churton away, and let you think that he had played you false."

Mona was horror-stricken.

This she had never for one moment suspected, and a deadly tremor came over her as she shrunk from the side of the dying woman.

"You did this? Oh, Ada!"

"Mona, Mona," she gasped, "forgive me, for my punishment is more than I can bear. I am dying now, and you may think that is the reason of my telling you this; but indeed I must have told you soon anyhow. My secret was weighing me down to the grave."

"Ada, I cannot! How can you ask me to forgive you? It is not my happiness you have ruined only, but his, too. What must you have made him think? And you say that you loved him!"

"Loved him! I love him now; but I cannot

love as you do. Mona, have mercy on me! Indeed I loved you too, and it was that which made me so cruel to you. I could not bear to meet you after I had betrayed you."

She was growing fainter and fainter, and Mona saw that she could not bear this awful excitement any longer. A dreadful struggle was going on in her own soul.

Looking on the fair, agonized features, which had once been so dear to her, some touch of the old tenderness returned, and she asked herself how dared she let this poor tortured soul pass away with the misery of pardon so earnestly craved refused?

But then could she forgive?—could she ever forget?

She must. She herself was not faultless, and how dared she refuse pardon to a fellow-creature?"

"Ada," she said, solemnly, and trying to steady her voice, which trembled with emotion, "I will try to forgive. Do not let us imbitter these last moments, if they really be so."

A look of peace came over the sufferer's face, and she grasped the girl's hand convulsively, saying, "Now I am at rest. There is only one thing yet, and you, who are so generous, will know how to forgive generously. I cannot think you will deny me."

"What is it?" said Mona, with sickening dread, for she feared a further revelation.

"Do not read that letter until I am gone; and, oh, then, when all is over, and you are happy, pray him to forgive me, too! There is a letter for him also. It is not finished. I could not do it; but send it to him when I am dead. And oh, Mona, never let your father know! He believed in my truth; let him do so always. Never let him know that I, too, was untrue. Promise me—promise!"

Her voice grew very weak from exhaustion, and Mona would not have dared to refuse this request, even had she wished to do so.

"I promise it shall be as you ask."

"May Heaven reward you! Kiss me, Mona, once again. Oh, that I had kept my vow, and made you some better return for your love! It is awful to say good-by thus!"

Mona kissed her, and then a deep silence fell over the darkened room.

At length the watcher thought she had fallen asleep, and so indeed she had.

But it was a sleep from which there would be no awakening; and Mona fell upon her knees to pray for mercy on the departed, troubled soul.

It was long ere she could rouse herself to realize what had happened. All had been so appallingly sudden.

It was with a dreadful start that she reflected that the news must be broken to her father, whom she had not even seen yet.

They had only told her that he had been seriously, but not dangerously, injured in the accident which had thrown him and his wife from the carriage in which they were driving to the hotel, after leaving the steamer in which they had just returned from abroad.

He took the news very quietly when they broke it to him, as soon as the doctor pronounced it safe for them to do so; but Mona saw that he would never recover from the combined effects of the mental and physical shock, and was inexpressibly touched by his helpless dependence on her care.

"Poor father, how he loved her!" she thought, as she saw him borne by the doctor and Charlie to look on the features of his dead wife.

For more than an hour he remained at the bedside, his head sunk on his breast, gazing at the lovely, rigid features, and touching the beautiful, cold hands with his, as though to recall the warmth of life to them.

Gently he smoothed back the shining golden hair from the smoothed brow, and kissed the unresponsive lips.

A deep groan burst from his own, and Mona almost sobbed aloud as she vowed, "He shall

never know. Whatever she may have done, it shall not reach his ears."

She had never looked at Ada's letter yet. There was so much to do, and she dared not open it until all the sad obsequies were over. Mr. Dysart insisted that his wife should be buried at home, and there was much to do to enable him, in his shattered condition, to join in the sad journey.

"What a return!" reflected Mona, as the mournful cavalcade rolled up to the grand entrance, and she remembered how the one whom they now brought back with the church's solemn toll had last left it, amid the clashing, noisy marriage-bells. The recollection, too, of the first time that Ada had come, nearly two years ago, occurred to her, and she felt inexpressibly sad at the failure of all their bright hopes.

"Poor Ada! she is at rest now. But, oh, how she has suffered! Indeed, I forgive you now, my dear friend! Oh, that you had been true, and I less uncharitable!"

But now the worst was over, and Mona at last had sought a retired corner to read that revelation which was like a voice from the tomb, pleading with her to remember her vow of mercy.

She had chosen the old spot by the willow-tree; for though it was winter, the weather was quite mild. With a feeling of awe and a prayer for strength, she broke the seal and read:—

"When you read this, Mona, I pray that I may be passed away forever from the life which my own act has made so intolerable. Where to make a beginning I know not; for I cannot tell when I first began to give way to the wickedness which has blighted my life and almost ruined yours. Oh, Mona, how can I tell you? How can I tell my generous darling of my return for her goodness and love to me? All I can say, to lessen the evil, is that I must have been mad when I did it.

"I loved Ralph Churton, and at one time believed that he loved me. Why, I scarcely know, but it seemed so then. Remember, darling, he was the first man who ever had shown any liking for my society. Even before I came to you I had met and, I believe now, learnt to love him. Then gradually grew the conviction that I was mistaken, and that you—you whom I looked on then only as a dear, innocent child, who would some day make Charlie Talbot a loving wife—had more influence over him than I; that he longed for your love, and gave you his freely and wholly.

"At first I thought him infatuated, for you seemed so to dislike him; and then, oh, Mona! came the awful trial. Your father told me a secret about your mother—a secret I promised never to divulge, and yet to explain I must even break that vow. He told me that she had died in an asylum, a victim to passion and habits of intemperance. It was nothing more. There is no danger of hereditary disease, and yet then I persuaded myself it was not so. You know Ralph's opinion on insanity.

"Can you forgive me, Mona? I told him that your mother was insane, but nothing else, except that you must never know it. He scarcely spoke another word, but went; and I knew then what I had done. Oh, that I could have recalled my words! All hope of his ever loving me was dashed away forever, and I had sinned to no purpose. I knew then that he had never really loved me, and felt as though my senses were deserting me.

"When your father asked me to be his wife I hoped that by making him happy I might atone for some of the misery I had brought into his house, and have tried to do so, and believe that he was happy. I know not if I shall ever see you in life again, but if not here, I pray you, as you hope for mercy on yourself, to have mercy on me. Much as I have sinned, I have suffered still more, and with the fervor of a dying woman I implore you to forgive, and to beg him, too, to forgive me, and, above all, to hide this from your father.

"Oh, Mona! two short years ago, or even one, I did not think to have sued to you for pardon. Had any one told me that I should be so treacherous, I should have laughed at them; but now mercy and pardon is all that I ask—your love was forfeited long ago. And yet, oh! sometimes remember the time when I was your own dear familiar friend.

"ADA."

The tears stood in Mona's eyes as she finished, and "I do forgive you, dear Ada!—may Heaven have mercy on your weary spirit!" broke from her quivering lips.

"Amen!" said a solemn voice by her side. And with one bound she sunk into Ralph's outstretched arms.

He held her tightly pressed to his bosom for some minutes, and she was contented to ease her overburdened heart with a good cry on that sympathetic breast.

When at last, remembering herself, she drew

back, he stood for a moment at her side, looking very quiet and sad, and yet very happy.

"Mona, it is all over now," he said, taking her hand in his. "I have learnt all from this poor, unfinished letter, and have come to ask you to be my wife. Will you, darling?"

"Yes." He folded her again in his arms, and she yielded to his caress with a feeling of perfect rest and security! "And you forgive her, Ralph? You will not think hardly of her?"

"No, indeed! I was much to blame for her mistake. Ah, my darling, I could not believe then that you would ever love me."

"Should I, then, have troubled so much about you?"

"Ah! I was so silly in those days so to think that love was blind. I could not understand the love such hearts as yours are capable of. But, Mona, I think, I hope I have grown better since your sweet influence first came into my life."

"Ralph, we will try to be very true; and I think perhaps this time of waiting has drawn us nearer. I have wanted you so, and could not understand why you had fled from me."

"And I longed to explain. My love, you have never been out of my thoughts, and henceforth shall never be long out of my sight!"

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